

**5TH SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT ~ OF ST. MARY OF EGYPT
SERVICE TO OTHERS ~ Mark 10:32-45**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, April 10, 2022**

In today's Gospel James and John ask the Lord that He may grant them to sit on His right hand and on His left hand in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Lord responds to their ambitious desires in a gentle way, saying that it is not for Him to grant, but for those for whom it has been prepared. Ambition and seeking to get ahead is a way of life in this world. It is a system where we must sell ourselves and demonstrate and prove our abilities and accomplishments. For example, we are forced into this situation when we apply for college, for employment, or for a promotion at work. In the Church there was a time when candidates for the episcopacy were selected by the common voice of the people themselves and were approached by higher church authorities. Most often the candidate would decline, but might acquiesce out of humble obedience. Today, however, in some Orthodox churches, candidates for the episcopacy follow the secular example and must apply for the position. Accordingly, they are required to compete and sell themselves just like the applicants in the secular world who apply for jobs. How does all of this square with Christianity?

Christianity teaches humility and repentance. In the prayers before Holy Communion we pray from our hearts that we consider ourselves to be the worst of sinners. Pride is considered to be the father of all sin. Pride is what propelled Lucifer to fall from being the chief angel of God and assuming the new role of Satan, the purveyor of evil and sin, the hater and enemy of God, mankind, and all that is good. In the secular world it may be the norm to try to sell ourselves and put ourselves above the rest, but it boggles the mind how this methodology has crept into Church life as well. There is a Greek saying that the greatest impediment to becoming a bishop is to say "το θελω," "I want it." Yet the contemporary practice is that not only must the episcopal candidate say "I want it", he must also prove it.

The Greek word for bishop "episkopos," is what, in ancient times, the chief slave, or overseer of the household slaves was called. Our Savior explains to His disciples that the main task of the bishops as the leaders of the Church is to serve the people. You see, the responsibility of the bishops and the clergy is to *serve*, not to be served. The bishop is the slave, or servant of God, and he is the slave and servant of the people ~ the chief slave. Our Savior demonstrated this profound teaching when He washed the feet of His disciples at the Mystical Supper. Thus, when understood correctly, the title "bishop" is a perfect reflection of the true role of the bishop in the Church. Furthermore, not only the clergy, but all Christians have a duty to serve each other. The Bible says, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." (1 Peter 4:10). It is in our service that all will see God's grace in action as we demonstrate our faith. When our Savior spoke about the Last Judgment, He revealed that it is our service to others upon which each of us will be judged on that last day. The greatest fulfillment and sense of accomplishment in the life of a human being is when he or she serves others. "It is better to give than to receive," our Savior teaches us. The husband and the wife offer self-sacrificial service and love to each other. Parents are always making sacrifices in the service and upbringing of their children. The monastic, having willingly deprived himself of a family according to the flesh, has adopted *all* the Christians and *all* mankind as his spiritual family, weeping and praying and fasting for his own personal sins and for the salvation and well-being of the entire world. Sometimes the monastic is called to immensely add to his labors by returning into the world and assuming the heavy burden of the office of bishop.

Today, on the final Sunday of the Great Fast, we celebrate the memory of St. Mary of Egypt. After this week, Great Lent will end and we will enter into the final phase of our journey to Pascha, a week that is so special and holy, that it is set apart from every other week in the year. When we contemplate the life of venerable Mary of Egypt, we can all take courage, for by her

example we see that there is no sin which is beyond the forgiveness and compassion of our Savior. Mary's early life was the epitome of evil and sin. However, when she repented and wished to be saved, God gave her superhuman strength so that she might rise up from the lowest depths of carnal sins and passions and achieve the greatest heights of sanctity, almost literally becoming an angel in the flesh. Marvelous and astounding are the gifts that God gives to those who love Him and valiantly struggle in the unseen warfare of the spiritual life! The greatest virtue exemplified by St. Mary and all the saints of the Church was humility. It was only through humility that she was able to overcome her evil ways. Ironically and paradoxically, the holier a person becomes, the closer one gets to God, the more humble they become, and the more they see how truly sinful they are. How different and opposite the ways of God are when compared with the ways of the secular world! Our Savior responded to this conundrum by saying that "He who would seek to be first among you must seek to be last, for the last shall be first, and the first shall be last." I once had a spiritual father who would say that he was not even a man, that he was only a worm. God created us from the dirt, from the soil of the earth. If you think about it, isn't it truly foolish and ridiculous when dirt tries to exalt itself? And that is exactly what happens when we are filled with pride. We are dirt, a worm, and we delude ourselves and think that we are superior and great and better than others. How far away from God is the attitude of self-exaltation! It is especially sad when we see the clergy of the Church behaving this way. This is how the Pharisees conducted themselves. This is exactly how the bishops conducted themselves who, like modern day Pharisees, slandered St. Nektarios and St. John Maximovitch, out of jealousy and pride. On the other hand, St. Nektarios and St. John, as true bishops and true saints, responded by showing us the path of humility, patience, forbearance, and a strict ascetical way of life ~ just like St. Mary of Egypt.

Holy Mother Mary of Egypt pray unto God for us! Amen.

