

SERMON - FORGIVENESS SUNDAY, March 10, 2019

RITE OF FORGIVENESS

Today with "Forgiveness Vespers" we enter into the mystery of the Holy 40 day Fast. During these holy days of repentance, prayer and fasting we seek to receive cleansing from our sins and passions and unite ourselves in a closer way with our Lord Jesus Christ. If we bear any grudges in our hearts against anyone, or if we know that others bear grudges in their hearts against us, it is necessary for us today to ask forgiveness from each other. "Before you offer your sacrifice at the altar, first go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then offer your gift at the altar," to paraphrase the Holy Apostle Paul. Our sacrifice is without merit, and our struggles will be in vain if we do not actively ask forgiveness from each other. Throughout the year this is also a steadfast rule and requirement of each and every one of us before we dare to approach the Chalice and receive Holy Communion. The concept and understanding is the same. In the Orthodox Church on this day, after the Forgiveness Vespers is served, everyone in church approaches each other and asks forgiveness from each other. First we kiss the cross and ask forgiveness from the priest, who likewise asks forgiveness from us. Then we remain in church and ask forgiveness from **everyone else** after they have kissed the cross. We must not omit anyone, and especially those that we know we have offended or who have offended us in some way in the past year. It makes no difference who is at fault. This is not about casting blame or judging each other. It is about only judging ourselves. Often we are blind and do not recognize that it is our fault that someone has been grieved by something that we have said or done. Perhaps we have said an unkind word, perhaps we have humiliated someone, perhaps we have disdained or hated someone, perhaps we have deliberately hurt someone in some way because we are so angry with someone. Beware Christian of harboring such ill will and such feelings! Remember that your brother and sister is created in the image and likeness of God, and when you disdain your brother, you are disdaining the Lord Himself. How you treat and judge others is how the Lord will treat and judge you. God sent His only begotten Son into the world to die on the Cross for the sake of the brother or sister that you bear a grudge against. If God judged us the way that we judge others, then we would all be in Hell and no one would be saved. God is mercy, love and forgiveness. If we would be Godlike in our actions and words, then we must imitate the Lord and also have love, mercy and forgiveness. In the parish which I attended as a young man, we always kept the rite of forgiveness on Forgiveness Sunday and asked forgiveness individually from everyone in church before we went home. As a seminarian at St. Vladimir's Seminary, I remember Forgiveness Sunday in the old small chapel, everyone making a prostration before everyone individually, asking forgiveness, and then kissing each other. I remember as a young priest when I was attached to the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in NYC how we all kept the rite of forgiveness. As with any rite or ritual, we can perform it in a perfunctory, superficial way and just go through the motions, or we can perform the ritual with sincerity and true feelings from our hearts. I can't help but think that if we all kept the rite of forgiveness as we should, how much harder it might be for us to judge others or speak ill of others behind their backs, knowing that on Forgiveness Sunday we will face that same person and have to ask forgiveness from him or her. I can't force you to ask forgiveness from each other. I can only teach you what our Holy Mother the Church teaches us and what is the standard practice in the Orthodox Church. I can explain to you why it is important and why it is necessary for our salvation to practice the rite of forgiveness. I can point you in the right direction. It is ultimately up to you to choose to do the right thing and not be ashamed to do so. It is up to you to open your hearts to love and forgiveness. I hope that you will all do the right thing. And only if you sincerely ask forgiveness from each other individually and kiss each other in brotherly love will you be able to sincerely greet each other on Pascha with "Christ is Risen" and again kiss each other again in brotherly love on that Holy and great day, to the glory of our heavenly Father, and His Only-Begotten Son and the Divine and Holy Spirit, unto ages of ages. Amen!