

**5th SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT  
ST. MARY OF EGYPT**

**From the abyss of sin to the heights of holiness  
By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev**

**April 6, 2014 ~ Moscow, Church of the Icon of the Mother of God “Joy of All Who Sorrow”**

The life of St. Mary of Egypt is well known to us. It is read in its entirety during the fifth week of Great Lent, and many of us have read it on our own as well. This is a very touching story about a woman who spent her youth in carnal sins, but later on, after being enlightened by the voice of the Mother of God, left her depraved way of life, went into the desert and through great feats of repentance and asceticism achieved great holiness.

While telling the Elder Zosima about herself, she explained how she spent her youth in debauchery and delighted herself by living with various men, without asking them for money, and earned her living by spinning flax. That is to say, Mary of Egypt was one of those young women (of which there are many today as well) who think that happiness consists of having as much self-gratification as possible: if someplace nearby there is a handsome fellow, then why not become physically intimate with him? Many young women and men think this way. If there is a beautiful girl, then why not spend the night with her?

This is how young people today often become acquainted with one another. When, after growing older, these young people and young ladies want to start a family, it doesn't happen, because they have become depraved, because they don't know the meaning of chastity and marital fidelity and because for them cheating is as easy as having short-term premarital relationships.

Perhaps according to modern standards there was nothing unusual about the life of Mary of Egypt before she began to follow the path of repentance. She was one of many women who indulged in self-gratification, not only from men, but also from good food, wine and music.

But behold, when the voice of the All-holy Mother of God stopped Mary at the entrance to the church, when she suddenly realized that her entire life was sinful, her heart sought repentance and yearned to struggle in the spiritual life. And Mary, having confessed her sins and receiving Holy Communion, left for the desert in order to begin a new life and to atone for her sins.

We know from the life of St. Mary of Egypt that the first seventeen years of her life in the desert was a time of fierce struggles, because as soon as she took some dry root to chew, she would remember the rich food and the wines with which she used to abundantly fill herself. In addition to this, the devil tempted Mary with the remembrance of the music that she used to listen to.

These years were times of unceasing struggles within herself with the unbearable passions that assailed her. And only after seventeen years of asceticism did the memories of her former life leave her and the grace of God begin to work more strongly within her.

At the time when this holy spiritual struggler met the Elder Zosima, clothes no longer remained on her body, [having long ago disintegrated] and even her body itself hardly remained, having shriveled up and the skin having turned a dark color. At first, Zosima could not even believe that this was a woman, thinking that he was seeing a ghost or an emaciated desert dweller. This is how Mary of Egypt is depicted on the icons — with a body that cannot be distinguished between a woman, a man or an angel. She was no longer tempted by the passions, having been freed from them. The Lord enlightened venerable Mary so that even though she never had a Bible in her hands and was unable to read because she was illiterate, yet she was able to cite passages from Holy Scripture. During prayer, the holy struggler would levitate into the air. Before the Elder Zosima even introduced himself to her, she called him by name, even though she had never met him before, for you see, God had given her the gift of clairvoyance.

St. Mary of Egypt is an example of a person who has risen from the abyss of sin to great heights of holiness. The Lord tells us that *the Kingdom of Heaven is taken by force, and men of violence take it by force* (Mt. 11:12).

The Lord and the Most-holy Mother of God does not call all of us to go out to live in the desert, to reject the world and the pleasures of life. The Church blesses us to live in the world, but at the same time we must remember that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us and that the path to the Kingdom is not easy for any of us, for it involves self-denial and repentance. For each of us, the beginning of repentance is the recognition of our sins.

The path of repentance does not exist for us only during Great Lent, but for our entire life. Great Lent — this is a time of fervent repentance, when the Church calls on us to reflect on our lives. But this does not mean that as soon as the fast ends, which will be soon, that we can forget about repentance and give ourselves over to our passions. We are called upon to always be watchful, so that our life would be chaste, so that the spiritual enlightenment that we experience during the days of Great Lent does not leave us when the fast is over.

The Church ordained that we should celebrate the memory of St. Mary of Egypt near the end of Great Lent, giving us yet more opportunity to reflect on the power of repentance and about the transfiguration of our way of life in order to follow the lofty and difficult path to the Kingdom of Heaven.

***Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen***