

“Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me”
Sunday After the Elevation, September 19, 2021
Mark 8:34-9:1
By Archpriest Peter Olsen

Our Venerable Mother Syncletica (4th cent.) is known as the founder of monasticism for women. In addition to a lifetime of severe ascetic struggles and fasting, she voluntarily accepted the cross of illness in her old age. She was put to the test by continual fevers and lung troubles. When she reached the age of eighty-five she began a three and a half year struggle with cancer, which burned her entrails like fire and caused her excruciating pain. Then she lost her ability to speak. Her body contracted gangrene and exuded a putrid stench. She endured all these sufferings like a second Job, with patience and gratitude to the Lord. When the time came for her to surrender her soul to the Lord, she was still steadfastly and loyally carrying her cross. She never lost her firm faith, trust and love for our Savior.

The Holy Elder St. Paisios of the Holy Mountain (+1994) was an amazing ascetic struggler and man of prayer of our times. He was gifted with the divine powers of clairvoyance and healing. He suffered from illnesses almost as a permanent condition. This did not deter him from severely struggling in spiritual and physical labors, which would exacerbate his illnesses and suffering. From the beginning of his monastic life as a young man he was given the cross of illness, at first suffering from a lung ailment and always spitting up blood. This cross would remain with him for his entire life. He constantly suffered with stomach ailments and headaches, and because his health was always so delicate, he would catch cold at the slightest draft. In spite of all this suffering, he never refused to open his door to those in need or seeking spiritual guidance, no matter what condition he was in, and no matter how sick he felt. He would see his visitors in church, and if it was cold outside, it was always cold inside the church as well. He never grumbled or complained, nor did he ask God to heal him. For five or six months he suffered from a slipped disc. In his last years he suffered from cancer and intestinal bleeding. He would have to relieve himself and passed blood nineteen times every night. Nothing else ever came out of him except for blood. Despite all of this he always strictly observed his ascetic rule, no matter how fatigued or worn out he was. Towards the end of his life he underwent surgeries and radiation treatment for cancer and suffered greatly while hospitalized. Bearing his cross steadfastly and faithfully to the end, he reposed peacefully at the Convent of Souroti in Greece where he was the Spiritual Father.

One of the the most famous saints who suffered from what probably was some sort of illness was the apostle Paul, who reveals this to us in his second epistle to the Corinthians: “And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh...Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

These are just a sample of the countless stories of great saints who, along with the cross of the monastic way of life also carried the cross of bodily illness and infirmity. The holy Elder Ephraim of Arizona (+2019) wrote that “Jesus became a model for us by bearing His Cross. He showed thus that whoever wants to be saved must follow Him, endure the cross which the Lord will lay upon him according to his strength, ascend to Golgotha, be crucified together with Jesus, and then be glorified together with the Lord in the kingdom of God.” Elder Ephraim goes on to say, “If the Lord Himself...carried a cross for the sake of man, for his salvation, how much more so do we sinners, who sin every hour, need a cross for our salvation?”¹ There are many components to carrying our cross, all of which require devotion, patience, love, sacrifice and self-denial. For example,

1. We must deny ourselves. This means that our self-will and desires must be changed to accepting the will of God. We must conquer our egos and be obedient to God ~ we must keep and obey His commandments and live the life of the Christian.

2. When we are in difficult circumstances, we must not argue with God or doubt His existence or that He is there to help us. We must accept the trials and temptations that come to us and remember the words of the Lord: “In your patience possess ye your souls” (Luke 21: 19-21).
3. We must accept the bitter medicine of the Cross in order to receive healing from spiritual illnesses and for the salvation of our soul.
4. We must be willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of Christ.

It is very common for people who have a serious or terminal illness to expend all of their money and all of their energies and even travel to any part of the world to try to extend their lives and defeat death. Very few are the people who are willing to do this or even half of this in order to become closer to Christ and to be healed of their spiritual illnesses. Many people who suffer from a grievous physical illness will undergo a difficult and painful regime in order to be cured: fast from certain foods, take bitter pills and medicines, suffer painful surgeries, and so on. Not many are the people who are willing to suffer in order to be delivered from sinful habits and for the sake of the health of their souls. They have no trouble understanding the nature of a serious physical illness, but they hardly have any understanding of the seriousness of the sickness of their soul. Isn't the sickness of the soul exponentially more serious than the sickness of the body? What is more important, how long we live on this earth, or how we spend our time here preparing to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven? The Lord said, “What good is it if a man gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26). But when the Cross of Christ is offered as the bitter medicine for the health of our soul, we hardly want to take it, and if the Cross is the Way to eternal life, then we hardly want to follow this path. We always think that our cross is too heavy, but it is as light as a feather when compared to the Cross that Christ carried for our sake because of His love for mankind.

In today's Gospel the Lord offers the Cross to everyone who desires eternal life. “Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). We should be grateful to be able to imitate our Savior and be permitted to carry our cross as the Lord carried His Cross. This is nothing new, and we will be following in the footsteps of many who came before us ~ apostles, saints, confessors and martyrs ~ who have all carried their cross and followed Christ. Besides all of this, there is no other way to be able to endure hard times that come our way while we are still making our way through the life on this earth. Christ and His Cross will be for us a light when our path is dark, He will be our health when we are sick, He will be our companion when we are lonely, He will be our riches when we are in want and He will be our joy when we are sad. Christ willingly and voluntarily lifted up and took His Cross. If we do the same and willingly take up our cross and follow Him, then our pain will be eased, and we will find the strength to have hope and endure all things for the sake of Christ. “Take my yoke upon you, for my burden is easy, and my yoke is light” said the Lord (Matt. 11:29-30). For as long as we shall live, may we always carry our cross with faith, hope and love, and uprightly walk the road of our Lord. Amen.

1. “Counsels from the Holy Mountain,” Elder Ephraim, St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, Florence, Arizona, 1999, pages 36-37.