

WEEKLY MEDITATION

Today is the Sunday of St. John Climacus. St. John is also known as “St. John of the Ladder” because of the famous book written by him, “The Ladder of Divine Ascent”. St. John wrote this book in the seventh century A.D., and next to the Bible, it is the premier classic on the spiritual life for Orthodox Christians. In fact, this book is a ‘bible’ of the spiritual life. If you wish to grow in your faith, to learn to pray, to progress on the spiritual journey, to advance in virtue and make war on your sinful passions, this book contains everything you need to know, and is arguably the best there is in this area of ‘spiritual life’ or ‘the ascetic way’. It is a guidebook that leads to heaven! This book is read during Lent in Orthodox monasteries and also by some outside of monasteries. However, it does have a couple of weak points: it is not a book for beginners, and it is written to monks. Therefore, lay people who read it need to be of sufficient maturity to be able to reinterpret St. John’s advice and apply it to their nonmonastic lifestyle, and they should have a spiritual father or mother that they can discuss issues with. Also, it probably shouldn’t be the first book that a person reads on the Orthodox spiritual or ‘ascetic’ way. There are other books that prepare the way for tackling the more formidable “Ladder”. I am often asked during confession to recommend spiritual reading for Great Lent. I recommend the excellent “Way of the Ascetics” by Tito Colliander and “Discourses and Sayings” by St. Dorotheos of Gaza. “The Arena” by St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, and any of the writings of St. Theophan the Recluse are also excellent. Then there is “Ascending the Heights: A Layman’s Guide to The Ladder of Divine Ascent” by Fr. John Mack, which can be read in conjunction with the Ladder. All of these writings make excellent Lenten reading or non-Lenten reading for that matter. I heartily recommend any of these books! Of course, it is in putting what the books say into practice in your life that is the real test. If you have never read any of these, they will challenge you to a whole new level in your faith. In fact, they are so useful, that even after multiple readings you will never outgrow them.

Fr. Stacey