

WEEKLY MEDITATION

It is sometimes asked, why do monastic and ascetic saints figure so prominently in our church life? For example, during lent we have made much of the life and witness of St Gregory Palamas, St John of the Ladder, and today St. Mary of Egypt in our liturgical worship and our seasonal teaching and reflections. Wouldn't it be good to celebrate the witness of some married saints and saints whose sanctity shone forth in family life? Wouldn't it be good to reflect rather more on the kind of asceticism that must be part and parcel of leading a godly life in the world?

This is a good question. A partial answer as to why we do what we do may lie in the fact that so much of the content of our liturgical tradition comes from monastic sources and was promulgated by church authorities who were themselves monastics. Monasticism is a very powerful resource in the ongoing life of the Church and the preeminence of monastics and ascetics in our liturgical calendar and thus in our hymnography and celebration is simply part of the given-ness of the tradition we have received. But if we have received this tradition, it is surely because Orthodox believers are, generally speaking, lovers of monks and nuns and monasticism. It seems to me that the traditional role of monastics and monasteries in the piety of believers is not something imposed from without but comes from a deep affection, attraction and resonance within. This piety need not preclude a sense that more emphasis on married saints and Christian family life would be helpful.

But the most important answer to this question lies in the internal, thematic meaning of lent as a time for the renewal of our discipleship by means of the opening of our hearts and minds to God's grace through ascetic effort. There is a cost to discipleship and that cost is the inner meaning of asceticism. The whole point of asceticism is to make discipleship costly. Unless the lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer and good works have an impact on self-satisfaction and a self-centered ordering and way of life, unless they inconvenience us in some way, unless they have a sacrificial character, unless they subvert in some way our nicely-ordered and comfortable lives, they don't have much point. *For the Kingdom of Heaven is taken by force and violent men bear it away and no one ever attained salvation through convenience and ease.*

Although monastic life cannot lay absolute claim to ascetic practice it is in the lives of some of these saints that we find a very powerful and inspiring image of the cost of discipleship. This is especially the case with St. Mary of Egypt. Her profound repentance, her ascetic struggle, and her dedication to prayerful communion with God make her an example and a powerful intercessor for us.

~Fr. Andrew