



THEOLOGY

CHURCH HISTORY

ORTHODOXY TODAY

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SAINTS. ASCETIES OF PIETY. CHURCH HOLY DAYS

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INTERVIEWS

MEDIA MONITORING

BOOKS

AUDIO

VIDEO

ON ST. JOHN CLIMACUS, AND THE MIRACULOUS REVELATION OF PATRIARCH TIKHON'S RELICS

A sermon given on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent, the week of St. John Climacus, on March 23/April 5, 1992, two days before the feast of the Annunciation.

*And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live?
And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.
Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones,
and say unto them, O ye dry bones,
hear the word of the LORD.
Ezekiel 37:3–4*

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

The Church dedicates the fourth Sunday of Great Lent to the memory of St. John Climacus, or "of the Ladder," as the author of *The Ladder* is called. There is a deep meaning in this. After all, the fast is entirely connected with repentance.



Icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent, Mt. Sinai

But what does it mean to repent? Only to name your sins and say, "I have sinned"? No! This is not enough for repentance. To repent means to change your sinful thoughts and feelings, to correct yourself, to become different. It is good to admit your sins, to feel the weight of sinful falls. But in place of a defiled life made straight by our Lord Jesus Christ through repentance, we need to begin the creation of a new life, a life according to the spirit of Christ. We need to grow, to spiritually ascend "from strength to strength," as up the steps of a ladder.

St. John of the Ladder left us a remarkable work entitled, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, which contains teaching on the ascent to the Lord. As *The Ladder* instructs, Christian growth and progress is achieved through ascetic labors. If Lord on His part provides a person with grace along the path to the Kingdom of God, then the person on his part must provide self-denial and labor.

The Ladder consists of thirty homilies (chapters), like steps, according to the age at which the Lord Jesus Christ began His ministry.

At the first step, the saint places the renunciation of earthly attachments. Then follow: detachment, life in exile, obedience, repentance, remembrance of death, tears, and meekness. Further on, the passions and others sinful states are revealed, and instructions are given for the struggle with them. Then is illustrated the path of the virtues, the mother of which is "holy and blessed" prayer. The "Ladder" is crowned by the union of three virtues—faith, hope, and love.

We will give a brief account of the saintly writer's life.

St. John Climacus lived in the sixth century. He received a good education, but left the world at age sixteen, entering the monastery on Mt. Sinai, where he was tonsured a monk at age twenty by Elder Martyrius. St. John lived with his elder in total obedience for twenty years. The Raithu monk Daniel writes of St. John that as a youth of sixteen, he ascended Mt. Athos in body, but in

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soul he ascended the heavenly heights.

After his elder's death, St. John departed to the Sinai desert called Thola, and lived there for forty years performing great ascetic labors, in ceaseless prayer, and deep compunction of heart and tears. He lived in a small cave, which people called "tear-streaming." The saint left the coenobium so that the monks would not hear his lamentations, and his lamentations and cries were very strong. Fasting, prayer, tears, silence, and the writing of books—this is what made up the life of St. John. He came to the monastery every Saturday and Sunday for services, to receive the Holy Mysteries, and to talk with the brethren.

After forty years of ascetic labors, St. John was chosen as abbot of Sinai. This appointment had been foreshown long ago. When Elder Martyrius came with his young disciple, John, to Anastasios the Great, the latter asked him, "Who is this youth, and who tonsured him?" Martyrius answered, "He is your servant, father, and I tonsured him." Then Abba Anastasios said, "Who would have thought that you would tonsure the abbot of Sinai?"

Another time, Abba Martyrius and John went to the great John the Sabbaite. The latter rose, poured some water, washed John's feet, and kissed his hand. When the disciple of the Sabbaite, Stephan, asked his elder why he did this, he received the reply, "Believe me, my son, I do not know who this youth is, but I received the abbot of Sinai, and washed the feet of the abbot."

The life of St. John was itself truly a ladder. The saint knew from experience what true spiritual life is, and therefore he wrote *The Ladder* at the request of the Abbot of Raithu, John.

Isn't it true, brothers and sisters, that a work containing such rare spiritual experiences and such superlative soul-saving advice is worth reading, if only out of inquisitiveness, during these days of fasting and repentance? Whoever can read it but does not punish his own self, for he deprives his soul of a most healthy and sweet food. For those who do not have a copy, we will try to read it from the ambo. [*The Ladder* can be found online at <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=102547112>, although this is not the preferred Orthodox translation, which was published by Holy Transfiguration Monastery.]

Patriarch Tikhon



Patriarch and Confessor Tikhon.

My dear ones, today, in the capital city of Russia, Moscow, another great solemnity is being observed—no small event in the spiritual life of our much suffering Motherland.

Given to Orthodox Russia for general veneration, as a living example of faithfulness to God even unto death, are the relics of His Holiness, Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow and All Russia, who finished his earthly course sixty-seven years ago on the feast of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Mother of God. St. Tikhon's seven years as Patriarch, which essentially became for him a way of the cross and Golgotha, shines forth now for all the world to

see.

Today in Moscow, after a service by the Council of Russian Bishops, the relics of Patriarch Tikhon will be translated from their place of burial underneath the small cathedral into the large cathedral of Donskoy Monastery.

Come, ye of Russia, and see, and bow down, and be edified, and be strengthened by the strength of spirit of the one who, while in the grave, received the power and authority from God to help the living! Let us learn through today's events the law of God, in order to live eternally in God, and

by God.

Except the Lord build the house, in vain do they labor that build it. Except the Lord guard the city, in vain doth he watch that guardeth her (Ps. 126:1).

In vain did the builders of a new Russia labor for seventy-five years, embarking upon the path of war against God (they did not learn from the builders of the tower of Babylon). In vain did they destroy every manifestation of spirituality and sanctity, hiding the bearers of God's gifts in the earth and in the waters, in slanders and lies, and in all manner of falsehood.

And as the sun passes through unclean places and yet is not defiled, so do these Godly luminaries arise pure, and reflect the radiance of the Eternal Sun—God. From beneath a bushel, in the right season, the Lord extricates these pure, fragrant candles, and places them upon the church candlestand of Russia.

The eleventh Patriarch of Russia, Tikhon, took upon himself the work from God during troubled and sorrowful times to preach the word of truth and love to the Russian people. The Patriarch suffered and wept over his desecrated Motherland, along with all the people. "We will reject the old world and build an earthly paradise—without God, without Christian conscience, and without obedience to the commandments of our ancestors," announced the new leaders, "and whoever does not want our earthly paradise, whoever does not believe in us, whoever does not accept our faith—him we will destroy." That was the terrible program that the holy Patriarch Tikhon had to face. For seven and a half years he did the work of God, enduring desecration and violence; and he was ready many times to receive a martyr's death at the hands of evildoers.

As opposed to the wicked spirit of the time, the holy Patriarch was steadfast and firm, especially when defending the Church from enemies. His words could be helpful also to all of us now, as the Church is again experiencing many sorrows and troubles. He would say, "Let my name perish in history, but let the Church be benefitted."

As Patriarch Tikhon preserved the Church in the purity of Orthodoxy during a period of ecclesiastical collapse, persecution, and schism, so does he now call us to follow his example, and walk in his path.

"Sin has corrupted our earth; let us purify our hearts with repentance and prayer," the saint preached to our grandmothers and grandfathers. Doesn't his voice today reach us, their grandchildren, as the fierce wind of hardship bursts through every door without exception? After all, we have seen the prophecies of many holy men already fulfilled, and the cup of God's wrath continues to pour out over a world that wars against God. But God will not be mocked. We are witnesses of that fact. The pastors and sheep of Christ's flock endure mockery, but those who endure and glorify God in their patience, will rise in glory and strength. They continue their work even after death—they carry their faith, their preaching of God, and life in God, to all people.

I would also like to bring to your memory the words of the humble Patriarch-martyr, which he pronounced after one of the numerous attempts upon his life. With these words the holy hierarch thanked the people for their love and prayer: "Submissive to the will of God, I remain at peace about my lot... and if the Lord sends me a peaceful death... blessed be the name of the Lord. But if it is my lot to live only few more days and die either from the knife or from gunshot, or by some other violent death, and no one will know where I am buried—may God's will be done; I am not better than my brothers who have already thus died. I would only wish that such a death might serve to cleanse me of my many sins, and be acceptable to the Lord as a fragrant sacrifice for the people..."

On March 1925/April 7, 1925, on the day of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Mother of God, on the day of the beginning of the salvation of mankind, Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow and All Russia reposed in the Lord. He died and was hidden for a time by God; for only the Lord could preserve his relics from the ubiquitous spirit of evil, which crushed every expression of sanctity in our time.

In 1989, by God's will, Patriarch Tikhon was canonized. This took place on September 26, the commemoration day of the holy Apostle and Evangelist

John the Theologian—the Apostle of love; this is very significant and has a mystical meaning. In the life of Godly people, as in the life of any person, there is nothing accidental; for the world is ruled and directed by God, with Whom everything exists in harmony, and is ordered sensibly. Only, one must have the eyes to see it.

The main guiding sign of Patriarch Tikhon's whole life, as he himself discerned it, were the words of the Holy Gospel of John, which he heard with his spiritual ears on the day of his consecration as a bishop: *Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?* (Jn. 21:15). And these words of the Lord's resounded to the Patriarch as a question to his life forever: "Tikhon! Lovest thou Me?" And he always answered, "Yeah, Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee!" He loved Him even unto death, all his life, through all his works.

Patriarch Tikhon implicitly asked this same question to everyone he met along his life's path. He directed these words to his Russian flock: "Rus', lovest thou the Lord?" And many, many of his co-strugglers and contemporaries answered him with the loyalty of love, following their Patriarch and father even unto the death of the cross, to their own sainthood.

Now, in our day, Rus' hears this same question from the relics of Holy Hierarch Tikhon. Now, only the words, "Yeah, Lord, we love Thee," embodied by our life, promises us life. But indecision, duplicity, and indifference promise us death, and not only spiritual death.

Patriarch Tikhon's life reminds us of God. The life of His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon witnesses to God. His life, death, and rest with the saints calls Rus' to awaken from spiritual sleep, in order to revive in God, and live in God.

On February 22, 1992, there was a miracle of the uncovering of the relics of His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon. It has not been so long since the time when no one could have conceived of this happening—we all know that right after the Patriarch's death, rumors spread that his remains had been destroyed. Who launched this thought into the air? Malefactors, or benefactors? God knows. Just try to figure out what happened then! Only now we understand and thank God, for this was the work of His hands. He preserved them.

Now, the time has come, and Russia again needs the preaching of the faith; and who is better able to preach it than he whose life was a living witness to the faith? Again, a miracle occurs—a maleficent hand, attempting to bring sorrow once more to the newly reopened house of God, Donskoy Monastery, commits arson. But from this ill-intentioned fire shone the light of grace—holy relics.

It was in connection with that very fire and the subsequent renovation that the thought arose to find out if those rumors were true. Thus, the Lord revealed to the world the relics of His servant.

The Patriarch was the spiritual leader of the Russian people during a very difficult time. He continues to be so during our difficult time in Russia—a time of schism, separation, and falls.

The Church's duty in such trials is to inspire and unite the people for the sake of saving their native land, faith, and truth, serving for unification under the spiritual leadership of His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. This is why the Council of Bishops was called during the days prior to this event—to strengthen the wavering, encourage the faint-hearted, rebuke those in error, and help all who need help.

It is significant that having made the decision concerning Church unity, the Council of Bishops completed its work at the reliquary of St. Tikhon, giving thanks for the convening of the Council, and praying to the holy Patriarch at the Throne of the Lord.

We also join with them in our prayers to the Patriarch-martyr for our Church and for our Fatherland, and pronounce the wonderful troparion composed to St. Tikhon. Here it is—listen to it!^[1]

Let us praise Tikhon, the patriarch of all Russia,
And enlightener of North America
An ardent follower of the Apostolic traditions,
And good pastor of the Church of Christ.







Who was elected by divine providence,
And laid down his life for his sheep.
Let us sing to him with faith and hope,
And ask for his hierarchical intercessions
Keep the church in Russia in tranquility,
And the church in North America in peace.
Gather her scattered children into one flock,
Bring to repentance those who have renounced the True Faith,
Preserve our lands from civil strife,
And entreat God's peace for all people!

Archimandrite John (Krestiankin)
Translated by Nun Cornelia (Rees)

07 / 04 / 2011

[1] This is the troparion to Patriarch Tikhon commonly used in America. Fr. John recited a different troparion, written by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1989.

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