



My Beloved Ones,

As we continue through the remainder of our Lenten journey, the Church, in its infinite love and mercy, has compassion for our struggles. Pascha is weeks away, and it can become easy to allow our weariness to become, at first a distraction, and then a temptation. It is for this very reason that the Church has chosen to dedicate this Sunday of Lent to St. John Climacus, and his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* takes the form of thirty “steps” toward *theosis*. These steps on the ladder begin with a renunciation of the world, continue with discussions on sins like slander & greed, before nearing the top of the ladder and learning how to acquire, *ἡσυχία*, or peace of the soul.

In this Sunday’s Gospel, we read of a man who brings his possessed son before Jesus—after the Disciples had already failed to cast out the demon. Our Lord is full of sorrow: not only for the boy, but also for his father, and for the Disciples, none of whom showed the faith in God required to seek a miracle. “Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has

this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:21-24) The Lord heals the man’s son, and after it looks like he has died, restores him to health.

“When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer and fasting.’” (Mark 9:28-29) Therefore, we can see that even the Disciples—men whom we love and revere as fathers—provide a lesson, not only in the strength of prayer and fasting, but how much seriousness one must fast and pray to call upon God in such difficulties.

While *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* began as a guide for those living in asceticism, there is much that we can learn from it, even simply by examining its icon. The struggle of the monks against the demons is frightening, but it should also give us strength. We realize that even these holy men and women who have chosen to set themselves apart from the world are still subject to the weapons of the demons (see that one of the monks is being swallowed by the Evil One).

If this is so for a person like a monk, how much more should we seriously devote the remaining time of the Great Fast to prayer, or indeed, the remainder of our lives. Only by carefully watching what goes into and what leaves our mouths can we count ourselves truly worthy to witness our Lord’s Resurrection, and to then, finally ascend the Divine Ladder to spend eternity with Him.

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta