

Midway through the journey to Pascha, we have the Cross set before us,
As a reminder both of our struggle, and our source of strength.

In today's world, we rarely hear of the need to bear one's cross – to bear suffering with meaning towards virtue.

Even among faithful orthodox, by living in a culture that is primarily focused on the individual, on freedom, and on pleasure,

We may have let ourselves believe the idea that God just wants us to be nice people, and to live happy, comfortable lives.

Furthermore, we're told that suffering is unacceptable, and that it can be fixed, solved, or driven out, with the right tools, the right comforts, or by placing the blame where it belongs.

But this is not the way of Christ, nor is it the way of the Christian. There is no Christian life without the Cross. To live according to God's will in a fallen world means bearing our cross of repentance with patience.

This is both our burden and our joy. Everyone must bear a cross, a suffering of some kind in this life. Those who do so joyfully with faith in Christ's deliverance become icons of the Resurrection.

And it is reflected in the prayer given to us during Lent (St. Ephraim's prayer), which we have been reflecting on these last few weeks:

Oh Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk. But give rather a spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to thy servant. Yea oh Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother, for blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages, Amen.

The prayer shows the cross a Christian life bears, as we pray to be delivered from the sufferings of our passions (sloth, despair, lust of power, idle talk), but also to take up the path of virtuous living in a sinful world.

Which brings us to the first two virtues of the prayer:
Chastity and humility.

Why would St. Ephraim put Chastity as one of such importance?
Well because in truth, this is a very difficult virtue to live,

In part because we are often uncomfortable talking about things like lust and sexual desire.

But even the great miracle working saints were tempted against chastity they're whole life.

So why is chastity so important?

St. Paul teaches that while other sins and passions (greed, anger, jealousy, to name a few) manifest in sin outside of us, something we enact upon the world – the passion of lust actually is a sin against our own body as well. We are “temples of the Holy Spirit” through our baptism; thus how we live in the body matters as a lived experience of our inward, spiritual life. Chastity is the power of the Christian life, a remedy to being ruled by our urges, by choosing to keep one's own body as a temple of the holy spirit. This also aids us in other virtues – prayer, fasting, almsgiving and the like.

We face a real struggle and a cross to bear! Our cultural has not only forgotten chastity, it openly ridicules it: tv and movies have openly embraced the idea of cohabitating before marriage, and mock those who “wait till married” as strange or repressed. Additionally there is the rampant growth of addiction to internet pornography, especially in young people who have unrestricted access to such things through technology. These things likely affect people you know, or perhaps even you! Even in the church, living together before marriage has become seen by many as not a big deal.

We are all sinners in needs of God's mercy and healing, and all who struggle with these passions should know that there is mercy and grace in the Church, which is a hospital for sinners and not a courtroom for judgment; nevertheless, we must strive to live to put away these passions and to live according the life and plan God has for us, which our Lord himself affirmed: “For this reason, a man shall leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall be made one flesh”. Sexual union is blessed because God brings this union together, not simply our own affections. And so directing our lives towards God's purposed plan is what brings life and not destruction.

May we take chastity seriously! To the youth and young adults in the parish, I give you a challenge – rebel against the culture! Our nation no longer fears God in its art and entertainment. Be chaste! Honor what God has given you and seek his blessing in marriage or celibacy. Fill you time and attention with wholesome

entertainment, read the lives of the saints, and build a life of prayer. This makes it harder for tempting thoughts to creep in and lead us astray.

For those in the midpoint of life, married, single, perhaps widowed or divorced – (it's harder when you're alone!) You face many temptations. Even in marriage you may wrestle with tempting thoughts and memories. I exhort you to live chastely, protect your eyes from things available to you, and live chastely in your homes. Guard your heart and your body. The truth of our faith and way of living does not change, because ultimately Truth is a person – Jesus Christ.

Even to the elders in the parish – You too live in chastity, in your thoughts, and live in such a way that you set an example for the younger faithful, raising them up in virtue and teaching them not to be ashamed to honor themselves through chaste living.

Finally, we also pray for humility.

What is humility?

Humility doesn't mean thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.

A humble person is one who is too busy seeing his own sins before God to be judging the person near him for his sins.

A humble person is one who understands that her very existence comes from God, and is a gift to be used to bless His Holy name.

A humble person is not one who lowers himself, but one who raises others up, serving them.

In our time especially, where we are devoid of great faith and miracles, humility is simply bearing the cross of our own spiritual weakness. We fall into the same sins over and over, we fail to keep the commandments, we work no wonders. And yet, If we can bear this cross with love and joy for God and our fellow man, with humility, thanking God for every good thing He has given – then God will accept us as His children, and We will receive the fruit of the tree of the Cross – which is the tree of Life in Paradise, and the fruit is Christ himself, who offers us His Life. Amen.