

Christ *the Physician of our Souls and Bodies*

Go to the Doctor

February Catechetical Reflection



CATECHETICAL YEAR 2021-22
EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES OF AMERICA

The Church will soon be entering the season of Great Lent, which is a time of preparation and cleansing leading up to Pascha – the Glorious Resurrection of Christ our God. In the weeks leading up to the beginning of the Fast, the Church gives us two parables to help us better enter into the season and be healed and cleansed of our spiritual illnesses.

If a person has a disease or illness, before the doctor can help in any way, the sick person must not only go to the doctor and ask for his help, but accept his diagnosis and follow his prescribed plan of treatment. In the parables this month, Christ tells us about men with spiritual diseases and wounds.

The Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee

The first parable is that of the Publican and the Pharisee, who both went up to the temple and pray: one man went up proudly, thanking God that he is better than other people, not like sinners, etc. The second man stands at a distance and simply prays “God, be merciful to me a sinner!”

The first man, the Pharisee, thinks he is praying, but doesn’t ask God anything, nor does he acknowledge his own weaknesses or faults. Rather, the Pharisee, though his spiritual blindness, praises himself, thinking that he is doing everything right, and is perfect.

The second man, the tax-collector, sees his own sinfulness and prays to God, asking for His mercy. He does not praise himself or compare himself to others. Rather, he asks God for help, for mercy and forgiveness.

If we return to our analogy of going to the doctor, we can say that the Pharisee went to the doctor and told him that he is healthy and doesn’t have any problems, while the publican went to the doctor and said, “I am sick, please help me.” In the Gospel Jesus tells us that the tax collector is the one who went home justified.

The week following this Sunday is notably a fast-free week, in which there is no fasting as there would customarily be on Wednesday and Friday. This has a practical purpose in that it provides an opportunity to use up meat and dairy products in the home in preparation for the Great Fast, but it has a spiritual purpose also. The Church wants to remind us not to be pride ourselves on perfect observances. Our healing does not come from perfect fasting, but from Christ who is merciful when we come before him in humility.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Merciful Father

The second parable is the well-known parable of the prodigal son, who cuts off his relationship with his father by demanding the entirety of his inheritance, and goes off and wastes it in lawless and sinful ways. After some time, due to foolishly wasting his inheritance, he is forced to tend pigs (the most unclean of all animals for the Jews) and was so poor he desired to eat the pigs' food.

Finally, this prodigal son admits his foolishness and decides to go back to his father and ask for his help, saying "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."

His father, who had already given his son everything he had a right to, welcomes him with loving arms, clothes him and feeds him, forgiving him of his sins, and celebrating his return, as if from the dead. This son, through his humility and by admitting his fault and coming to his father to plead forgiveness, receives more than he expected, and more than he deserved.

Yet in this story there is another prideful character: the man's second son becomes angry at his father and refuses to join in the celebration, complaining that even while he has kept all his father's commandments and served him faithfully, he has not been given such a celebration as this.

The contrast between the two sons is similar to that between the Publican and the Pharisee: the one does evil, but recognizes it, asks for forgiveness, and is forgiven, while the other, even while living an arguably righteous life, is prideful and blind to the reality of his state. The pride of the second son and of the Pharisee is a spiritual disease; through pride the son cuts himself off from his father and brother, and the Pharisee's pride prevents him from truly praying and being in relationship with God.

Go to the Doctor

We are all afflicted with spiritual diseases and wounds, some worse than others. Just as when we have physical wounds or diseases, we must honestly look at our illness, and go to a doctor so that he can help us be healed, so with spiritual diseases, we must go to Christ, the Heavenly Physician, and earnestly ask Him to heal us of our weaknesses, strengthen us against temptations, and forgive us of our sins against Him.

The coming season of the Great Fast is a period especially dedicated to the cleansing and healing of our souls, so that we can be freed from everything that hinders us from having a true relationship with God our Heavenly Father.