

On Forgiveness Sunday and Cheesefare

By Bishop Milan Lach, SJ

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

The Book of Genesis says the first man and woman lived in paradise in Eden. We know that they lived in harmony and holy communion with God, with one another and with their own selves, without suffering, sin, sorrow, or death. This harmony was disrupted by the devil, finally leading them to disobey God.

The cause of their disobedience was their willing choice to succumb to temptation. They thought they knew better than their Creator and Lord. That Adam and Eve preferred to trust in themselves, their pride and self-importance, rather than in God, led to their fall from communion with him. Once they had rejected God, they also rejected freedom from sin and had to face the penalty of death, not only of their bodily death, but the death of their relationships with God and with each other.

The consequence of their fall was clear to both of them: it was only in living in the manner God had intended, which was opposite to what they had determined themselves, that they would restore their relationship with God. Instead of disobedience, they now had to live in obedience; instead of being prideful, they needed to practice humility.

God also gives us, the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, the opportunity to ask for forgiveness and to restore our relationships through the sacrament of confession. Confession is our Savior's gift: God gives us an opportunity to correct our mistakes and sins. He wants us to ask for forgiveness, so that we can then take strength from him, stand up again and walk in truth.

There is always the possibility to reconcile with the Lord through your priest who will be in church one hour before Divine Liturgy every Sunday to hear confessions. This will start from the First Sunday of the Great Fast onward. God does not need our confession; we do. To confess at least four times a year, during the four fasts of the liturgical year, is the minimal effort we can make to renew our hearts and souls. In this way, we are rightly prepared to partake at the Eucharistic table of our Lord.

As the prophet says, "Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ez 33:11).

Every confession seizes the opportunity once given to Adam and Eve in Eden. By asking God for forgiveness, we restore fellowship with him as it was in our original paradise.

God always forgives those who, with sincerity and repentance, ask Him for forgiveness. On this holy day, before we ask forgiveness from God, first we must ask forgiveness from each other. We have a beautiful tradition in our Byzantine Catholic Church to exchange forgiveness with one another at Vespers the Sunday evening before the first day of the Great Fast.

We have to ask forgiveness of those present and also those not present, perhaps by visiting them. But from those who are here today, we can ask for forgiveness directly for all the sins committed towards them in word, deed or thought, whether voluntary or involuntary.

The Lord says in today's Gospel: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt. 6:14-15).

We cannot ask God for forgiveness if we do not ask each other for forgiveness first. Without forgiveness, there is no way back to paradise for any of us. Let us then forgive, be forgiven and regain the lost grace of our loving Father, through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

My dear brothers and sisters, I pray for you and for your salvation every day. In particular, at every Sunday Divine Liturgy and every great feast of the Lord, I commemorate Bishop John Kudrick, the priests, deacons, subdeacons, nuns, all your families, the elderly and the sick. Please pray for me and for my salvation.

+ Bishop Milan Lach, SJ

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