

3rd Sunday of Luke 2006: Pelagia the Penitent

A sermon by Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
Delivered on October 8, 2006

EPISTLE: 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

Are you tired of salacious scandals and the political exploitation of personal sins? Are you confused by being told to accept every behavior under the sun and at the same time to condemn those who fall publicly? Do you question if “tolerance” is really an ethical benchmark, especially when it seems to be applied with a two-edged sword? The Christian is not called to be tolerant, but to be compassionate and loving, which is a higher standard. After all, when we love something or someone we would never express it by saying, “You know, I really tolerate you.” We tolerate things we dislike, even hate. But the Christian is called to “love your enemy, do good unto those who wrong you.” So is there another way, a way that allows us to fulfill the Gospel without hypocrisy, without compromise, standing up for what is right without playing the judge? Today in the Church we read St. Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians and the great call to purity:

Brethren, ¹⁶And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” ¹⁷Therefore “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.” ¹⁸“I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty.” **7** ¹Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

The key is how we live in such a way as to be clean, perfecting holiness. How do we “come out... and be separate” from the wickedness of the world without isolating ourselves from the

world, and thus hiding the Gospel? Today the Church commemorates the memory of our holy mother Pelagia the Penitent, whose life can be a model for us.

Pelagia lived in Antioch, it is believed in the third century. She was the ancient world equivalent of the modern diva celebrity superstar, fabulously wealthy and owning many servants, attended by a massive entourage. She bedecked herself with countless jewels, cosmetics, perfumes, and lured many men into losing not only their fortunes but their souls for the sake of her attention. One day, as she was going about the town in her typical processional fashion, she passed by the Church of St. Julian, where the people had gathered outside to hear an edifying sermon by one of the bishops of that city, St. Nonnus. He was known to be an excellent preacher whose words astonished all by their wisdom and moved many to repentance by their sweetness. But even so, they could not compete with the pomp and celebrity of Pelagia, whose dazzling apparel and fragrance of her perfumes dumbfounded those standing outside.

The other bishops who were there turned their eyes away in shame. But not Nonnus. Rather, he gazed for a long time at this profligate woman and even began to weep so that his vestments grew visibly soaked. And then he addressed the people once again: “Woe to us, we negligent and useless ones, because we shall all be ashamed at the hour of judgment by this harlot, who to please mortal men diligently adorns herself so that she might enjoy a little but bitter pleasure. But we the mindless ones indifferently dismiss, without regard the soul, instead of preferring the immortal and living God. Moreover we prefer what is vain and perishable, thus insulting and disdain our dignity...Thus we are condemned to everlasting damnation for our negligence.” And thus he spoke with many other soul-benefiting illustrations. Later that day he went to his cell and wept and prayed all day, asking God to pardon his negligence, for, as he

prayed aloud, “one day of that harlot’s diligence surpasses the attempt of all my life to adorn my soul as a habitation for Thee.”

Now the next day, Nonnus was called upon again to preach. For the very first time in her life, Pelagia also was there. Perhaps she had heard of this preacher who could bring men to tears. Perhaps she had heard that he had publicly spoken of her the day before, and out of vanity, wanted to see if he would do so again. In any case, God Himself in His compassion inspired the events of that day. That day Nonnus preached once again about the immortality of the soul, the righteous judgment of God, and the need for repentance. His words struck Pelagia to the core, and she who was previously immodest was brought to contrition. Later she came to the church before Nonnus and all the other hierarchs and there publicly confessed her sin, weeping with tears that she shed at his feet just as the harlot of the Gospels did at the feet of Christ. That very day she was baptized and received the immaculate mysteries, and the city rejoiced at her salvation. She would go on to sell all of her treasures, distributing her riches to the poor through the Church, freeing all her slaves and giving them gifts to start a new life. She stayed for eight days with her Godmother, the deaconess Romana, and then disappeared. Later it was discovered that she had lived out the rest of her life in penitence in Jerusalem, disguised as a monk with the name Pelagios, and reposed in peace and holiness.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Lord said to the Pharisees who thought it was befitting righteousness to be self-righteous and to condemn others, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you,” (Matt. 21:31) for they heard the Gospel but did not repent. Penitence is what saved St. Pelagia. Penitence is what St. Nonnus preached. Penitence is the third way for the world. Though the world looked at Pelagia with both lust and disgust simultaneously, through penitence, Nonnus saw true beauty, and his own

unworthiness. Because of his humility and refusal to judge another while at the same time upholding the truth of God's judgment, Pelagia was able to find salvation as well. Thus he fulfilled the command of the Lord,

¹“Judge not, that you be not judged. ²“For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. ³“And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? ⁴“Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank *is* in your own eye? ⁵“Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matt. 7)

When the Lord commands us not to judge it does not mean to accept or be tolerant of evil behavior. Rather it is to first judge ourselves as unworthy, and to see our own sins. For how can we judge another when we who should know better are no better!? As St. Paul says, ³¹For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.” Only then can we have the compassion necessary to help heal and correct our neighbor in a spirit of genuine love. Only then can we realize that the thing which troubles our neighbor, or perhaps more honestly, troubles us about our neighbor, is the very thing which we ourselves suffer from. God himself has paraded it before us in the form of the person we are tempted to judge that we might come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved, seeing our own sins first. And having come to that knowledge, we can finally and truly repent, being washed by our tears as completely as we were washed in our baptism.

Therefore let us be bold in our response to the scandals of this present world, by confessing our own sinfulness, our own spiritual negligence, knowing that had we been better Christians perhaps our neighbor would not so easily stumble. Through the prayers...