

On the occasion of the commemoration of Sts. Cyprian and Justina

The Temptation of St. Justina and the Repentance of St. Cyprian*

The Feast and commemoration of Sts. Cyprian and Justina bring to mind some important truths deriving from the experience of the Orthodox Church. The holy members of the Church have always been subject to temptations, in accordance with the wise Providence of God, but have always been victorious. They have, thus, become the cause of the conversion of others—until then enslaved to the darkness of the Devil—to the light of Christ's Truth.

ST. JUSTINA WAS a model of love and virginal dedication to Christ, just like the Holy Protomartyr Thekla, the Equal-to-the-Apostles. Her pure heart, ablaze with Divine love, prompted her to frequent God's Church, fashioned by human hands; the Grace of the Holy Spirit made her heart an altar, not fashioned by human hands: a "temple of the living God."¹

When Cyprian the sorcerer sent evil spirits to vex her and induce carnal desire in her, so as to befuddle her and make her a plaything in the hands of a licentious youth, Justina resisted valiantly and resolutely.

Demonic assaults and the temptations which they provoke are not without limits or checks: "The demons...cannot fulfill their own evil will to cause the destruction and perdition of another when God, Who governs all things, does not so will; but even when He does so will, He sets limits as to how much harm they should do."²

In this way, while a person's freedom is tested, his will is not forcibly dominated by Satan. The Devil acts through the passions and stimulates us with feelings of pleasure. And when, because a person is vigilant, he cannot act through the mind, he stimulates the body, in order to arouse it and thereby seize the mind.³

But constant vigilance on the part of a person, wakefulness, and prayerful alertness render him a vessel of Divine Grace, and thereby the attacks of the Evil One are repulsed. The dew-laden Grace of the Holy Spirit quenches his fiery arrows. When the sign of the Cross is not made merely perfunctorily and externally, but reflects an inner disposition of crucifying one's carnal desires, the invincible power of the Precious Cross banishes the Devil and puts an end to his unclean machinations. Unceasing invocation, in a spirit of repentance, of the Divine Name of Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Son of God—Who annihilated the Devil—and union in the Eucharist with the Lord of Glory, our God and King, truly crush and overwhelm Satan.

So also in the case of St. Justina: a powerful nocturnal temptation

at the hour when she awoke for prayer prompted her to oppose it at once with her spiritual weapons and to make the enemy disappear through the sign of the Cross: "I saw a sign of some kind and I trembled!" admitted the Devil.

However, until he was finally destroyed, the enemy did not cease to war against what is good. He also appeared to the Saint physically, in the form of a maiden, in order to deceive her. And he has this property. "The grosser demons fight against a man's body."⁴ In their endeavor to destroy a man, demons can approach him in two ways: "either through a dense material substance, or through a very refined immaterial substance";⁵ that is, either visibly and corporeally, which happens rarely and only according to God's Providence, or invisibly and incorporeally, as usually occurs.

The enemy, therefore, attempted to inject his poison and corrupt the Saint's thoughts, "as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety,"⁶ and he brought upon her, albeit for a moment, perplexity, turmoil, and mental confusion; for, the Saint saw one who was supposedly a virgin and fellow-struggler, but heard words that emanated from a profligate antagonist! But once again, the sign of the Precious Cross, made with faith and prayer, drove the tempter away in shame.

The consequences of this victory of the virgin Justina were incalculable. A new triumph of the Faith was beginning.

The admission of the demons to their devotee, Cyprian the sorcerer, that they were powerless and had failed in their mission, initiated the reversal of his situation. The son of darkness became a son of Light through repentance, renunciation of the Devil, and recourse to the Church of Christ.

Justina was the instrument used by Grace to bring about St. Cyprian's repentance. Cyprian himself recognized this immediately: "I must grasp the feet of Justina, so that she might bring about my salvation." When the evil spirits attacked him fiercely, he cried out: "O God of Justina, help me!" On hearing this, the demons vanished. They did not, however, abandon their efforts, but returned, using thoughts of despair to impede Cyprian's repentance. They maliciously assured him that he would once again come under their power, since God would surely reject him as someone abominable and impious.

In truth, Cyprian appeared for a moment to be overwhelmed and, under the weight of his sins, to doubt God's inexhaustible goodness and the possibility of his complete conversion and sincere repentance. Could he return to Him Who is Life?

With the aid of certain pious people, the Lord of life encouraged him at this critical juncture in his journey towards the healing of his diseased nature; Satan's malevolent activity was exorcised, Cyprian's thoughts of despair were banished, and his return to God was accomplished. The presence of God is the advent of His Kingdom, which is

manifested through a life of repentance. There is no other way in which a man can be restored and saved.

“Repentance is a return from the unnatural to the natural state, from the Devil to God, through asceticism and toil.”⁷ Repentance, the “door of Grace,” is the first step on the path towards knowledge of God; it is also a condition that persists throughout the course of our ascent to God, an ascent which involves both cleansing and perfection. Repentance is not simply remorse for certain deeds and sins, but rather, a struggle to “encounter” God and achieve union with Him. This union is attained through labors and tears over one’s past and present loss of God. Only thus is a man’s nature transformed, and only thus is he preserved from the spiritual delusion of self-justification, complacency, and acquiescence. “For this reason, repentance is demanded of all people and at all times, and there is no limit to the perfection of repentance; for, even the perfection of the perfect is incomplete, and hence, until the hour of our death, repentance is not confined to particular times or particular deeds.”⁸

To give up repentance is to give up making any spiritual ascent and is a symptom of spiritual death, whereas unceasing repentance and its blessed fruit—that is, the gift of a contrite and humbled heart and the repetition of the prayer of the Publican, “O God, be gracious to me, a sinner,” until we reach the very door of the Kingdom—constitute a sure sign that our hearts are possessed by Divine love.

The purification of human nature through repentance and tears is ultimately perfected by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, which penetrates a man’s heart and transforms it.

This was the Grace that delivered the maiden Justina from her temptation, converted Cyprian the sorcerer from the captivity of darkness, sanctified both of them, transformed them into vessels of Divine glory, and, after crowning them with the wreaths of martyrdom, finally entrusted them to the Church as protectors of the Faithful and expellers of unclean spirits.

* Translated from the Greek periodical *Άγιος Κυπριανός*, No. 310 (September-October 2002), pp. 161-163.

Notes

1. II Corinthians 6:16.
2. St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 3.
3. St. Maximos the Confessor.
4. St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Ascetical Discourse*, §81.
5. St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 84.
6. II Corinthians 11:3.
7. St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book II, ch. 30.
8. St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 55.