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# JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. IX

Sunday of Mary of Egypt



*“Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.”*

(Lk 7:47)

The final Sunday of Lent is dedicated to **St Mary of Egypt**, the model of the penitent. Born c. 344AD, and baptized Christian, at age 12 she ran away to the big city (Alexandria) looking for ‘fun’. There were men more than happy to exploit Mary’s naivety and soon she was sleeping around, not for money, but out of compulsion and had to beg to earn a living. This is the way of sin: chasing glamour, pleasure and attention, we end up, in return, abused and degraded by the world. If we heed St Poemen’s advice – *“Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy the heart”* – we would reject many so called pleasures as worthless. Mary lived ‘ignorantly abused’ until her late 20’s, when she went to Jerusalem for a big festival; she was curious, and hoped to corrupt a few pilgrims, too. Caught up in the procession of the Cross, she tried to enter the Holy Sepulcher Church with everyone else but was blocked by an invisible force. Suddenly Mary saw all: her sin, her distance from God, her rotten lifestyle. Tearfully praying all night before an icon of the Mother of God above the church door, Mary was able to enter the church the next day. Venerating the Cross joyfully, the sinful Mary heard the holy Mary say to her: *“Cross the Jordan, and you will find true peace.”* After receiving Holy Communion, Mary crossed the river Jordan and lived in the desert wilderness. Living off the meager food available, Mary’s clothes soon

disintegrated, her skin turned black from the sun, and her hair grew long and white. Alone, she battled with her sinful past: memories, inclinations and old habits, constantly asking God for help. She did this **for forty-seven years**. We only know about Mary at all because God arranged for a priest-monk, Zosimas, to meet her in the desert. Zosimas found a woman emaciated and living like an animal; but he also found a Saint, because Mary was able to work miracles. Through him, we now know about Mary's life today. So important is her life that the Church reads it on Thursday in the 5<sup>th</sup> week of Lent at matins. What can we learn from it? **1) Don't judge**; it would be easy to see Mary aged 26 & see her as 'beyond help', yet she still repented. **2) The world does not satisfy us**; chasing earthly pleasure or glory leaves us abused. **3) Repentance**; Mary shows us how to repent whole-heartedly, if not in the details of her life then in the complete rejection of her sinful past. **4) True greatness**; many are called 'great' for their deeds: in politics, cinema, sports etc. but how many 'greats' will be celebrated *and prayed to* in 1,500 years' time? **5) A model for us all**; the Virgin Mary's words to Mary are for all of us: *"If you cross the Jordan, you will find true peace,"* that is, if we leave behind our earthly desires we can, with God's help, find peace and salvation. **The life of Mary of Egypt:** <https://www.stmaryofegypt.org/files/library/life.htm>

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## The 5 stages of sin | Understanding why we do the things we hate

The Desert Saints' lives of solitude (like Mary's) gave them a unique insight into the human soul and psychology. One profound fruit of the saints' mystical lives is the understanding of how sin and passions take control of us; knowing the stages helps us to guard ourselves from serious sin.

**1) Assault:** did a thought ever pop into your head that made you wonder "where did *that* come from?" The saints recognized that some thoughts do come from 'outside', without being 'invited in'. These thoughts assault us daily, and to have them is not a sin, even if they're horrific. Jesus was tempted by Satan, and even saints are plagued with 'bad thoughts' constantly. Be aware also that the assault is not always solely external – our experiences, memories and habits all lie within our subconscious and are susceptible to being 'stirred up' by daily interactions. Here, a chance encounter, conversation or something we see creates a thought in our head that troubles us. These thoughts can also be considered as an 'assault' and therefore, by themselves, not sinful.

**2) Interaction:** St Paisios said: *"thoughts are like circling airplanes. If you ignore them there's no problem. If you pay attention to them, you make an airport in your mind and permit them to land!"* When we give

attention to a thought, we start to ‘interact’ with it. Maybe we get a thought to steal a pile of money; interaction is when we start to debate whether this is a good idea. Though also not a sin, **it is dangerous**. Even if we intend to argue *against* a thought there is a risk we’ll talk ourselves round to sinning; if not, we can still become tired and discouraged by constantly arguing with ourselves. Better to follow John the Short’s advice: *“When a man sees wild beasts come toward him, he climbs up a tree and is saved. Likewise, I’m aware of evil thoughts coming against me, and when I have no more strength, I take refuge in God **by prayer** and I am saved from the enemy.”*

**3) Consent:** this is when you’ve made a decision – you *are* going to take the pile of money. This is the beginning of sin, and the stage Jesus referred to when He said that if you covet another woman, you’ve already committed adultery (Matt 5:28). It’s still possible to be liberated from this stage: e.g. fear of being caught or, better yet, fear of breaking one of Jesus’ commandments.

**4) Captivity:** we commit the sin. Immediately after, we will often feel shame and lose all desire to ever commit the sin again. But be aware: having sinned once, we’re more susceptible to ‘reoffending’, and the bad thoughts will return, particularly if we don’t confess the transgression.

**5) Habit:** With each successive fall into sin, the time between steps 1–3 becomes shorter. It’s easier to sin than not, and the sinning itself becomes our “second nature” (John Chrysostom). This leads us to being abused by the world as St Mary was, and we will come to doubt our salvation.

**NB:** the 5 stages also apply to **good thoughts**, with the end result being a good habit, or **virtue**. If we keep watch over ourselves & understand these stages, we can realize the true weakness of ‘fearsome’ thoughts, ignore them – or boldly confess when we don’t – & cultivate virtue instead!

### The Eight Deadly Passions – **Vainglory and Pride**

John Climacus stated that vainglory and pride are as different ‘as a child is from a man’ and so put the two together, just as Gregory the Great did (turning the 8 passions into 7 ‘deadly sins’). We naturally tend to respond well to praise and therefore seek it for ourselves and our actions. But the glory we receive is ‘vain’ – which means ‘worthless’ – because it isn’t given to the right person: God. However hard we work, ultimately all our strength, resources, even our existence, comes from God and *to Him be all the glory* (Ps 113:9 LXX). Pride is the ‘consummation’ of vainglory: where we have come to believe the useless praise of men and come to see achievements

as ‘ours’, not God’s. Pride is the root of all other passions; indeed, it is the ‘original sin’, whereby Eve believed the words *“ye shall be gods”* (Gen 3:5) and disobeyed God’s commandment.

**Signs of Pride:** You’re breathing! John Climacus sums it up: *“I am proud when I fast; and when I relax the fast to go unnoticed, I am proud over my prudence... When I talk I am defeated, and when I am silent I am again defeated. However I throw this prickly-pear, a spike lands upright.”* Self-justification, boasting, criticizing others and self-reliance are the most obvious indicators. Endless pursuit of education, career and people-pleasing are more subtle signs. Excessive sorrow over a sin we’ve committed is also a sign of pride: we’re disconsolate over our fall because we think we’ve already advanced spiritually beyond such mistakes. In reality, we shouldn’t be surprised if we fall every day.

**How to combat Pride:** The chief virtue that defeats pride is **humility**. Pride caused the chief-angel to fall from Heaven; by humility, a man can make the return trip. For humility to have this power, it mustn’t be false. In truth, humility is not about debasing ourselves publically, but seeing ourselves as we really are. Recognizing our weaknesses, and the *source* of our strengths (i.e. from God), precludes us from feeling self-esteem. The varied practices of Lent already discussed in these booklets help fill our hearts with the humility (or *humus*, lit. ‘earth’) from which all other virtues can grow. But beware: pride can flare up when we make small steps in the spiritual life, making us think we’re almost saints. Indeed, as a monastic saying goes, *“Praise your brother and you give over his soul to the devil.”* Therefore: *“When we have attained some degree of holiness, we should always repeat the words of the Apostle: ‘Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me’ (1 Cor. 15:10), as well as what was said by the Lord: ‘Without Me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5)”* (John of Damascus). Many words can be used describing humility, but in the end it must be experienced to understand it. *“Pride comes before a fall,”* and often the fall is needed to teach us humility. But that depends on us accepting a little embarrassment, criticism or discomfort. This is easier to do when we recognize that God is in control and He loves us; therefore the exposure of our falls is often not a disastrous defeat, but a divine spur to humility and the greater victory over pride!

*“As we eagerly begin, O faithful, the sixth week of the Fast, let us sing a hymn of preparation for the Feast of Palms, to the Lord who comes with glory to Jerusalem in the power of the Godhead, that He may slay death. So with reverence let us prepare the branches of virtues, as emblems of victory; and let us cry Hosanna! to the Creator of all.”*