

GREAT FAST MESSAGE OF THE UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC HIERARCHY OF THE U.S.A. TO OUR CLERGY, HIEROMONKS AND BROTHERS, RELIGIOUS SISTERS, SEMINARIANS AND BELOVED FAITHFUL

Glory to Jesus Christ!

“Coming to his senses at last, he thought: ...I will get up and return to my father, and say to him, Father, I have sinned against God and against you...” Luke 15:17-18

Not too long ago a television news magazine aired an interesting human interest story about one man who had embarked upon a startling and unexpected path in his life. This man was born and raised in a working class section of one of this country's great east coast cities. Eventually he went away to college, earned a degree and secured an entry level position with a well known manufacturing firm. He proved to be a hard working and capable employee and rose quickly through the corporate ranks eventually becoming the vice-president of personnel in the firm while still a young man. He married and bought a luxurious home in one of the most exclusive suburbs of the city. He seemed to have it made: money, health, happiness, comfort.

There came a time, however, when his life changed radically. His wife unexpectedly left him, for another man, and his position in the firm where he was employed was made redundant and he lost his job. Suddenly he was left without a family or a career - all in the space of one short week. He was shattered and he realized that his life up to this point had been like a box, brightly wrapped with colorful paper, ribbons and bows on the outside, but empty inside.

In the aftermath of these dramatic events, he suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to return home, to the city of his youth. He sold his mansion and moved back to the working class neighborhood of his boyhood. There he rented a spartan two room apartment in a rather seedy building and found a job at a local outlet of an international chain of coffee houses, not as the corporate director of sales, but as the chap behind the counter - the barista - who takes your order and pours your coffee and gives back your change.

It was here that the reporter's camera found him, happy and fulfilled in his new life. “In my other job”, he told the journalist, “with the stroke of a pen I was deciding the fate of literally hundreds of employees, but I didn't know even one of them. I never, ever looked one of them in the eyes or tried to understand what they were feeling. Here, behind this counter, God has given me many wonderful two-minute windows of opportunity every day to look another person in the eye, to say hello, to serve him some coffee and to wish him the best.”

This is a wonderful true-life story of a man who had seemingly lost everything he had worked for, but rediscovered something of much greater value: what it is to be truly human and what it means to share one's life with others. And it is not at all surprising to note that this process of rediscovery necessitated a 'coming home'. This man returned to his boyhood home in order to ultimately find fulfillment and happiness in his life.

In the gospel lesson for one of the Sundays which prepare us for Great Lent - the Sunday of the Prodigal Son - we likewise encounter a 'coming home'. The youngest son of a wealthy father, having selfishly squandered his inheritance and having been reduced to abject poverty in a far-off country, suddenly comes to his senses and realizes what exactly it is that he has turned his back on. “How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough to eat, while here I am dying from hunger!” (Lk. 15:17) And he also sets off in return to his boyhood home where, in the embrace of his father, he finds fulfillment and happiness and rediscovers what it is to be truly human, to share one's life with others and what it means to be the son of loving father.

Each and every one of us is re-living the dilemma of the Prodigal Son who was reduced to eating corn husks, and the unfortunate young man who had lost his job and his family. Each and every one of us, in his or her own way, through our own sins, have turned away from our childhood hearth and home and have struck out selfishly on our own. We have rejected the God who created and nurtures us and have put our faith in ourselves and in the world. And if the world has not yet failed us, it undoubtedly will.

The Church then, in her age-old wisdom, has given us this blessed time of Great Lent upon which we now embark, so that that we can more easily remember what it is we have lost, and rekindle in ourselves the desire and the power to return home and rediscover the love we have so callously rejected, the love of our Heavenly Father for us.

The liturgical services of a uniquely and deeply penitential and meditative character which are celebrated during Great Lent offer us a golden opportunity to plant the seeds of remembrance and repentance in our souls. This, along with fasting, self-control, alms-giving, personal prayer, and the Holy Mystery of Confession can instill in us the courage to rise up from our miserable state and take the first steps on the journey home. During these weeks of Great Lent that lead up to Pascha may we once again rediscover what it is to be truly human, to share our lives with one another and what it means to be children of a loving Father.

Our wish and prayer for each and every one of you is that you enjoy a prayerful and fruitful time of Great Lent and a joyful 'home coming' to the arms of the loving Father who is already hurrying along the road to meet us.

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