

Hesychia and Theology

Theological Lessons from the Life of St Mary of Egypt

In the summary of the life of St Mary of Egypt that we have been considering, the greatness of her personality is already evident, as is the power of God's grace, which brought her to new birth through the wretched state she was in. We shall now, however, undertake a brief analysis of ten theological points that can be identified in the life of St Mary of Egypt.

As we examine these ten points from a theological standpoint, certain phrases from the life of St Mary will have to be repeated to support our argument. We shall mainly be looking in more detail at the summary of her life that has already been set out, but we shall also refer to other passages not previously cited. In any case, repetition fosters learning and retention.

a) The Gift of Baptism

St Mary of Egypt was baptised at an early age, and after Baptism she sunk into a dissolute life. She herself confessed to Abba Zosimas: *"I am a sinful woman, but I have been walled about by Holy Baptism"* (15). She sinned as a baptised Christian, and made the members of Christ into members of fornication. This gift of Baptism, however, made it possible for her, through the baptism of repentance, to return to Christ, and for her members to become members of the Body of Christ.

The Baptism that we receive as infants is called the washing of regeneration, because through it we are born again into a new life. By Baptism we are restored to the state that Adam was in before he sinned. It is a gift of the Church to enable us to cast

off the garments of skin, our corruption and mortality, and to be lifted up spiritually. St Athanasios calls Baptism, *“A planting for eternal life”*². St Basil regards it as *“a chariot to heaven, the cause of our acquiring the kingdom, the gift of adoption”*³.

Baptism is actually the spiritual vaccination that we receive as infants so that, when we grow up, we can of our own free will vanquish sin, the devil and death. This does not mean that we are deprived of the great privilege of freedom, a gift that God gave us at our creation. Since we do not forfeit our freedom, we can choose to sin even after Baptism, and still have the potential to deny God. According to St Symeon the New Theologian, *“Baptism does not take away our free will or freedom of choice, but gives us the freedom no longer to be tyrannised by the devil unless we choose to be”*⁴.

According to St Diadochos of Photiki, the grace of Holy Baptism confers on us two gifts. The first is given immediately by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, when grace renews us, illuminates the divine image in us and washes away every stain of sin. The second is that grace co-operates with us to paint the divine likeness over the divine image in us. This second gift comes when our nous, by our own free will, tastes the goodness of the Holy Spirit. So the grace of Baptism *“starts by remaking the divine image in man”* and restores it to what it was when he was first created by God. Then, when it sees us *“longing with all our heart for the beauty of the divine likeness and humbly standing naked in its atelier”*, it bestows the divine likeness on us⁵.

It is good that we receive Baptism at an early age because, without depriving us of our freedom, it gives us the possibility, if we so choose, truly to become members of the Body of Christ.

b) The Grace of Repentance

St Mary of Egypt's repentance came about through God's grace and the blessing of the Holy Mother of God, and was expressed with great intensity. She denied the world absolutely, renounced all the wishes of the carnal 'old man', and transformed all the powers of her body and soul. By so doing she not only activated the grace of Baptism, but also lived the blessed state of deification. St Mary of Egypt lived in an extreme form something that many of the ascetic fathers of the desert experienced. They would hear a word, either directly from the presence of God as revelation, or from the Elders, and then they would go deep into the desert in order to live this word for the rest of their lives. Every word of revelation has great energy and many years of ascetic effort are required to make it a living reality by God's grace. This happened in the case of St Mary of Egypt. For forty-seven years she struggled to put into practice the word of revelation that she heard in the Church in Jerusalem, and to assimilate the experience of grace that she was granted through the veneration of the Precious Cross and the voice of the Holy Mother of God. This too came about by the energy of that word.

We can also discern various expressions of self-accusation in her speech. She feels ashamed of her deeds (17); she regards herself as a snake because of her former life (17); she calls herself dissolute (25), "*a sinful woman*" (13) and "*a woman bare of all virtue*" (14).

Man has free-will, and God Who gave it to him does not take it away. Nor does He deprive him of the gift of Holy Baptism. Man therefore has the potential, on account of passions, death and corruption, but also as a result of attacks of temptation, to

commit sin. The grace of Holy Baptism does not then abandon him completely, but remains in the innermost recesses of his heart, hidden by passions and sins. St Diadochos of Photiki teaches that by Baptism the devil is expelled from the soul, and the grace of God now dwells in its very depths. The devil is, however, permitted to act through the body, from outside⁶.

Repentance comes about by man's co-operation with the grace of God. It activates the grace of Holy Baptism, which is present in the depths of the heart and is hidden by passions. This is why the service of monastic tonsure, which is an expression of repentance, is called 'a second Baptism'. Repentance is man's return from the unnatural state of the loss of communion with God, to the natural or supranatural state of progressing from the divine image to the divine likeness.

St John of the Ladder has some amazing words to show the great value of repentance: "*Greater than baptism itself is the fountain of tears after baptism, even though it is somewhat audacious to say so.*" He explains these daring words by saying that Baptism is the washing away "*of evils that were in us before*", whereas repentance, the second baptism, washes away "*sins committed after baptism*"⁷.

Repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit and can be activated in man because the grace of Holy Baptism and Holy Chrismation is within him. St Nicholas Kavalas writes that we receive the grace of Chrismation together with Baptism, but we perceive its effect later, when we want to live a godly life and repent of the deeds that we have done. The gifts of the holy Chrism are, he writes, "*the gifts of godliness, prayer, love, and sobriety, and the other gifts which are opportune for those who receive them*"⁸. Elsewhere he writes that for some people the gift of Holy Chrismation manifests itself later through repentance and a change in their way of life: "*Some have subsequently repented and bewailed the sins which they have*

committed and live according to right reason, and so have given proof of the grace that has been infused into their souls'⁹. Even if someone excels in love, purity, self-control or humility above the usual human limits, this is a gift of the Holy Chrismation that was bestowed on him when he received the Sacrament, but "*became active afterwards*"¹⁰.

It follows that St Mary of Egypt's repentance and tears were the action of Holy Chrismation, as was her victory over corruption and mortality.