

Fifth Sunday of Great Lent St. Mary of Egypt

On the fifth Sunday of Fast, we are enjoined to celebrate the memory of our Holy Mother Mary of Egypt.

The Church service for this Sunday is devoted to the memory and glorification of the spiritual efforts of Saint Mary of Egypt, who "has cut down with the sword of abstinence the desires of your soul and the passions of your flesh. You have choked your sinful thoughts with the silence of the ascetic life, and have watered all the wilderness with the streams of your tears, and caused the fruits of repentance to spring up for us" and "with works of Lenten fasting", "as sun she shines revealed as a guide to all who have sinned".

In her life the Holy Church pays attention to two contrasts: on the depth of her sinful falling and on the height of her graceful rising; it points out that true repentance wipes away the very heaviest sins, and can uplift the repenting trespasser to a high degree of spiritual perfection.

The story of Saint Mary's life was written down by Saint Sophronios, Patriarch of Jerusalem.

The Life of Saint Mary of Egypt is read during Great Lent along with the Great Canon of Saint Andrew, Archbishop of Crete.

Mary lived as a prostitute in Alexandria for 17 years, more to gratify her lust than for money. Out of curiosity, she joined some pilgrims who were going to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Holy Cross. The journey from Egypt did not interrupt her sinful lifestyle. In Jerusalem, she tried to enter the church with the rest of the group, but an invisible force held her back. Finally, realizing her sinfulness, she prayed for help from the Theotokos and vowed to live a life of penance. She was told to cross the Jordan River.

Mary received communion and crossed the river into the wilderness, where for about 47 years she saw no other human. She was tormented by physical needs and mental assaults, but she endured through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

Around the year 430, the priest Zosimas found Mary in the desert. She told him her story and asked that he tell no one about her until after her death. Zosimas promised to meet her a year later to give her communion. When he saw her the next Lent, she walked across the water of the Jordan to receive the Holy Eucharist. Then she walked back into the desert and died.

When Father Zosimas came back the next year, he found Mary's body and buried it. With her burial, he was free to tell the world of her life.

A Journey Through Great Lent

Very Rev. Stephen Belonick