

THE LENTEN ENCYCLICAL  
of  
His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim

Recently, while I was reading Saint John Damascene's work, *Concerning Those That Have Reposed in Faith*, one phrase caught my eye:

Once again, God's goodness prevailed over His decision to punish, as indeed happened in very many other instances, and His love for mankind will always prevail until the Last Judgment, at which time the end of this festival will come, and there will no longer be an occasion for succor.... Whereas now is the time for concern, the time for trade, the time for labor and hustle and bustle, and toil. And blessed is that man who will not grow weary, who will not tire of hoping. And yet more blessed is he who struggled both for himself and for his neighbor.

(Chapter 14)

God's love, says St. John, will always prevail "until the Last Judgment, at which time the end of this festival will come."

The "festival" that Saint John of Damascus speaks of is the duration of this opportunity that we are given to accomplish something worthwhile — to show what we have produced, to present our accomplishments for the Judge to see.

At every county fair, people bring their wares, the animals they have raised, the vegetables they have grown, the pies and the cakes they have baked, and the crafts they have manufactured so that they may be assessed by the appointed judges. Whoever produces the best, or the biggest, or the tastiest, or the most beautiful item in question in each competition is the one who gets the prize.

Whether we call this opportunity that we are given a "festival," a "county fair," a "carnival," or whatever, the idea is the same. It is a time of struggles, of strivings, of contest, a time of selling and buying — that is, selling (i.e. getting rid of) of our sins, and buying (i.e., acquiring for ourselves) the virtues: faith, love, mercy, concern for others, almsgiving. On Meatfare Sunday, we bring to mind the Last Judgment, which, as St. John

Damascene tells us, is the time when this "festival" will come to an end. Our Lord says in the Gospel:

When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy Angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory. And before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth the sheep from the goats: And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was ahungered, and ye gave Me to eat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took Me in: naked, and ye clothed Me: I was sick, and ye visited Me: I was in prison, and ye came unto Me. Then shall the righteous answer Him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee ahungered, and fed Thee? Or thirsty, and gave Thee drink? When saw we Thee a stranger, and took Thee in? or naked, and clothed Thee? Or when saw we Thee sick, or in prison, and came unto Thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Amen, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me. Then shall He say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was ahungered, and ye gave Me not to eat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took Me not in: naked, and ye clothed Me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited Me not. Then shall they also answer Him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee ahungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto Thee? Then shall He answer them saying, Amen, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life everlasting.

(Matt. 25:31-46)

This Gospel, my beloved, tells us that we will be judged for such simple things as feeding the hungry, giving a cup of water to the thirsty, giving hospitality to strangers, clothing the naked, and visiting the imprisoned. St. John Chrysostom tells us that we must show this kindness especially to our brothers and sisters in the faith (Homily 79 on St. Matthew).

In his Homily on Galatians 6:9-10, Saint John Chrysostom tells us also the following:

Lest anyone should suppose that their teachers were to be cared for and supported, but that others might be neglected, he [Saint Paul] makes his discourse general, and opens the door of this charitable zeal to all; nay, he carries it to such a height, as to command us to show mercy both to Jews and Greeks [i.e., pagans], in the proper gradation indeed, but still to show mercy... Therefore he says, "as we have opportunity, let us work that which is good toward *all* men," hereby especially also setting the faithful free from the narrow-mindedness of the Jews. For the whole of the benevolence of the Jews was confined to their own race, but the rule of life which Grace gives invites both land and sea to the board of charity, only it shows a greater care for its own household.

Continuing his commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Saint John Chrysostom says: "In return for services so small and cheap, Christ offers such a Heaven, such a Kingdom and so great an honor". We are given eternal salvation and blessedness for the "small and cheap" services of feeding the hungry, giving a cup of water to the thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, clothing to the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned.

My beloved faithful, let us use the time of this "festival" to acquire spiritual profits. Our Saviour has pointed out the easy way for us to accomplish this in His teaching on the Last Judgment. The "festival" of the holy and great Fast especially is a golden opportunity for us to acquire these riches, so that we may joyfully celebrate the "Feast of feasts," Holy Pascha! Amen. So be it.

Your fervent suppliant unto God,

✠ Ephraim, Metropolitan

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