

True

Almost all of my formal education was spent in Catholic schools. From my earliest days, I remember being taught that we Catholics possessed the one true faith. Back in those days, when all our services were in Church Slavonic, I was totally unaware that this same idea was sung in the Divine Liturgy: “We have seen the true light.” As a Dominican, I have learned that this “true light” is so much more than mere assent to a number of dogmas or decrees; the words of a hymn bring this out sharply: “May what is false within us before Your truth give way...” (Gulp!)

I am sure that by now you are bored silly with a theme which runs through all my preaching and my writing: icon. Nonetheless, I bring this theme up again because it strongly marks the season in which we find ourselves – namely, the Great Fast. Indeed, the First Sunday of the Great Fast, called the Sunday of Orthodoxy, emphasizes this importance: it commemorates the return to the churches of the icons, which had been banished by the now defeated and discredited Iconoclasts. Way back then, the victors in an ideological battle in effect did a victory dance, perhaps not unlike the dance that football players do in the endzone - as much to taunt their defeated opponents as to celebrate their success. With us, the restoration of the icons is more than the commemoration of a historical victory; rather, it deals with the restoration of Christianity within us.

We claim to be Christians – that is, people who carry Christ. When people look at us and at our lives, they should be able to recognize in us a credible icon of Christ. During the Great Fast, we often contemplate the face of Christ on the icon of the Holy Napkin; we often refer to this image as the “icon not made with human hands”. If we lived the Christian life as Christ intends, we too would be grace-filled icons “not made with human hands”. That’s a big “if”, for all too often our actions belie the faith we profess with our lips and which we seek to show in our worship. By our lives, we disfigure the image of Christ which others seek in us – both in what we do and in what we fail to do. The eighth commandment forbids us to “bear false witness” against our neighbor; by our sins of omission and of commission, are we not bearing false witness to the God who seeks to be manifest in and through us? Oh, dear!

Not a pretty picture, is it? It’s a wonder we can look ourselves in the mirror every day! Perhaps that’s why we so often choose not to look at ourselves, but rather to see a sanitized image of ourselves through rose-colored glasses, and to face the world from behind a mask which hides all our “warts”. The Great Fast is the time when we are called upon to get rid of the mask and the rose-colored glasses in order that our true situation may become apparent. Back in the good old days, we used to call this an examination of conscience.

The disfigurement from which we suffer may be what we are truly experiencing, but it is not our true selves; rather, the truth is that we are inflicting our infirmity upon ourselves by our foolish choices. You don’t believe it? Ask someone who is involved in a twelve-step program like Alcoholics Anonymous. We all have some sort of “monkey on our backs” – be it alcohol or some other “idol” which controls us and consumes our time, our energy, our lives. The commercial for the U. S. Army echoes God’s will for us: “Be all that you can be”; as long as we remain slaves to sin, we never will.

“May what is false within us before Your truth give way...” God wants us to be our true selves, to be fully alive, to be so identified with Him that His divine life animates us. How do we get that to happen? We need to look ourselves in the mirror and realize that our masks and our rose-colored glasses are hurting rather than helping us, stunting our growth rather than fostering our life. Jesus tells us that He has come so that we might have life and have it to the fullest (John 10: 10). This is Gospel truth. What is keeping us from embracing it, from enjoying it? When we find out and then get rid of these obstacles, then and only then will we understand what we mean when we sing “We have seen the true light.”

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op