

From: [Church Community Builder](#) on behalf of [Saint George Gr Orthodox Church](#)
To: [Michael Haldas](#)
Subject: [Entire Church Group] THE SECRET IS IN THE CLIMBING
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THE SECRET IS IN THE CLIMBING

His name was John (AD 579 - 649), a seventh century monk and the Abbot of the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine at the base of Mt. Sinai. He came to be known in history as John of the Ladder (Κλίμακος), and he left Christendom with a text that has had a universal impact that ranks with the Philokalia. Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia wrote "With the exception of the Bible and the service books, there is no work in Eastern Christianity that has been studied, copied, and translated more than **The Ladder of Divine Ascent**." On Sunday we will commemorate this great monastic saint and fervent ascetic. His message in The Ladder provides the answer to the fundamental human question: **How can I achieve genuine happiness in my life?** Furthermore, it gives us the pathway to obtaining that happiness – the process of union with God. At its core, The Ladder speaks to hope, as Fr. John Chryssavgis writes: "There is an underlying optimism in John, consisting in his belief that man was created by God for joy and not for sorrow, for laughter and not for tears." To illustrate this teaching about union with God, St. John uses the image of a 30-rung ladder, a concrete, ordinary image easily identifiable to anyone.

The ladder hearkens back to Jacob's Ladder in Genesis 28:10-19. The idea of steady climbing upward was also used by St. Gregory of Nyssa two centuries earlier: "God's dealings with man are on an ascending scale. If we see clearly the lowest rung on the heavenly ladder, the veil of mist shall depart and we will see the next above it, and then the next and, in due order, the next; and so the steps that slope away through darkness up to God will always be beckoning to greater and yet greater

things.” Our progress towards intimacy with God is, therefore, dynamic, it implies movement on our part, it is about progression, it is not static nor does it happen automatically, independent from the active efforts we make. St. Gregory further anticipates St. John’s own belief, gained from personal experience, “Having once put your foot on the ladder which God is leaning against, go on climbing...every rung leads up to the beyond....Finding God means looking for Him tirelessly.....Seeing God means never to cease to desire Him.” In the Ladder of Divine Ascent, the first three rungs are about detachment from worldly things; the next four address the virtues; the next 16 represent the struggles with the passions; the next three address the higher virtues in practice; and the final four represent union with God in the contemplative life (theoria).

Critical to St. John’s message are **the passions** and their transformation into their original virtues --- virtues that are at the core of human happiness in God. What are the passions? They are the emotions and impulses that can assault us as people who are body-soul, physical and spiritual. Evagrius of Pontus, in the Philokalia, identifies a formal list of passions. He notes them as follows (in order of ascending seriousness): gluttony, lust, greed, anger, dejection, despondency, listlessness, vainglory (vanity), and pride. Other patristic lists of passions exist and are, in some measure, at the root and foundation of all sin. They can never be satisfied, once and for all, and they are impulses that are etched into our brains and neural structure -- programming “automatic” responses from us. The Ladder of Divine Ascent helps us to overlay **new** responses, those not centered on our own egos but are rooted in God’s living image within our hearts. St. John Climacus warns us in Step 1: “Violence and unending pain are the lot of those who aim to ascend to union with God, and this especially at the early stages of the enterprise, when our pleasure-loving disposition and our unfeeling hearts must travel through overwhelming grief toward the love of God and holiness. It is hard, truly hard.” We are called to break old habits. We are summoned to go against our baser, intuitive instincts and to walk the “via negativa” – the way of self-denial. As in contemporary Cognitive Therapy, we are called to develop entirely new ways of thought (schemas) through the steady and disciplined “reprogramming” of our negative images and impulses. Simply put, this

is the work of Orthodox asceticism – switching the negative “tapes” that we play over and over in our brains to positive, life-creating messages. **Every passion is an unnatural form of a virtue.** Passions frustrate us, virtues bring genuine satisfaction. Passions create inner struggle within us, virtues bring peace. Passions have our ego at their center, virtues place Christ where He belongs -- on the throne of our hearts. Passions are ultimately death-bearing, virtues are abundantly life-giving.

Our passions are easy to neglect or even ignore entirely. The Orthodox spiritual writer Klaus Kenneth, author of the text “Born to Hate/Reborn to Love”, writes: “People who are attached to whatever they enjoy in their current life, have difficulty accepting the idea that they need to sacrifice anything for the sake of eternal life.” Because the passions seem so “natural” and seem a part of our nature because we play those negative messages incessantly in our minds, they are easy to hold on to and even easier to neglect. For this reason, each of us needs to “take an inventory” to clearly and honestly identify what passions may be our greatest difficulty. If the passions work against our true happiness, then we need to deal with them. To do this, St. John counsels discernment which he describes as “...understanding the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things and it is found among those who are pure in heart, in body and in speech.” (Step 26) Knowing ourselves when it is difficult to do so requires self-honesty. Naming our passions and their resultant sins, “owning” them is the first step up the spiritual ladder. St. Isaac the Syrian teaches: “It is a greater miracle that a person see their true self than that they raise someone from the dead!” Each passion gives us a clue about its opposite virtue and thereby points the way to transformation, to authentic change of heart. We just need to climb – however much we may falter or fail – we must still climb upward. In the climbing is our hope, for the more we ascend the deeper we move into our heart of hearts to meet Him who has been called “our tremendous Lover.”

Healing from our passions is a restoration project. We, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are not creating something **new** in us. We are restoring virtues that were already given us at the moment of Creation. By assiduously working to climb ever-upward, the person on the spiritual

ladder, doing the hard work of struggling, is laboring to restore the pristine relationship that existed with God in Paradise, to restore the "natural" life that is intimacy with Divine Love. We are getting our spiritual house in order. We are seeking to tend our hearts and souls. St. John describes this restoration this way: "God does not demand or desire that someone should mourn out of sorrow of heart, but rather that out of love for Him he should rejoice with the laughter of the soul. Take away sin and then the sorrowful tears that flow from bodily eyes will be superfluous. Why look for a bandage when you are not cut? Adam did not weep before the fall, and there will be no tears after the resurrection when sin will be abolished, when pain, sorrow, and lamentation will have taken flight." **(Step 7)**

Day by day, you and I do the work God asks of us, we rise and we fall, we try and sometimes we fail, we sin and we hate our sin, we walk in darkness and yearn for the light – yet the important thing, above all else, **is that we continue climbing** -- for union with God is not simply at the end of our journey upwards, it is born in the climbing itself, it is in the process, it is in the movement higher – no matter how long it takes or painful it may be. St. John Climacus closed **The Ladder of Divine Ascent** by lovingly giving us his assurance: "Ascend, ascend eagerly. Let your hearts resolve to climb. Listen to the voice of Him who says: Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of our God, who makes our feet like deer's feet and sets us upon high places that we might be triumphant on His road." Through the intercession of St. John of Sinai, may God give you and me the strength to keep climbing. To God be glory unto the ages of ages. Amen!

Your servant in the Lord,

Fr. Dimitrios

(Please find attached a copy of Sunday's Bulletin for your prayer and preparation.)

Attachments:

[APRIL 7, 2019 ST. JOHN CLIMACUSfin.pdf](#)

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