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8th Sunday after Pentecost

It is natural for us to feel gratitude towards those who help us. In learning good manners our children are taught to say *please* and *thank you*, in order to fit in to common society. But in being drawn to kind and helpful people there is a danger that certain people can become obsessively attached. When dealing with their patients, practitioners of psychiatry are taught to be on their guard against those who might try to form too strong and too dependent an attachment to their therapist. Psychiatric patients can even become infatuated with the doctor who has helped them through their problems; one who, perhaps for the first time, has shown them concern and given them full attention. The ethics of the therapists' profession, of course, demands that they keep a proper distance and detachment.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, remarked that Man is a political animal: we can presume that we mean much the same thing when we call ourselves *social*. We have always needed other people; there is safety in numbers; we like to be with our own, those of a common mind: these things are natural, even if, in a fallen world, they might lead to exclusion, suspicion or hostility towards the outsider.

Think of those in the church at Corinth, mentioned by St Paul today in the epistle: those who claim to *belong* to Paul, *belong* to Apollos, *belong* to Cephas, *belong* to Christ. You see, they are forming denominations already! Perhaps, like psychiatric patients, nursing their neuroses, the Corinthians were attaching themselves to the one who brought them the saving gospel, as if the preacher were of more significance than the gospel itself and the One proclaimed in it.

Yet we do need each other. Even the self-made man, the entrepreneur, the superman-individual, still requires that there be other people to admire his achievements and feed his pride.

We must beware of these things in the Orthodox Church. Quite rightly, naturally and religiously, we reverence our clergy, those set

over us in Christ, our priests and pastors. With due deference, we shall honour our own Metropolitan Archbishop next week, when he comes to visit us: a bishop, in succession to the Apostles themselves, who by grace, presides over the Household of God here, and under whose authority alone, I am permitted to stand in his place over the Eucharistic assembly. The consecrated Antimension cloth, bearing the Holy relics, lies on the holy table, signed by Archbishop Silouan. Without that, we cannot share today in the holy mysteries of Christ, according to the holy canons of the Church.

But we are well-aware of the dangers of clericalism, that over-dependence of the sacred ministers. It is not without significance that we talk of the priest *serv*ing the Liturgy: yes, we are servants. Any great house might depend upon its servants to run smoothly but the house does not exist *for* the servants but for the family. And, likewise in the House of God, the Church exists to the Glory of the Holy Trinity. It is for the clergy themselves to be on guard against any tendency towards narcissism and that self-regarding love of power and position, which is a grave spiritual danger.

There is for us only one dependence in the end. Though we be grateful for those who bring us the grace of the gospel, of those who point the way, they are but messengers, ministering like angels around our souls. It is to the Creator that the creature looks; it is Christ Himself who is our firm foundation; it is the Holy Spirit who is the Giver of Life in God.

The very point of any change, any healing or therapy, any restoration to the plenitude of life, is not to become fixated on the one who shows the way but to be set free in order to grow and develop the fullness of our potential. And so it is in the gospel: the hierarchy of the Church, her sacred ministers are indeed the channels of God's grace, not that *they* may become the focus of our veneration, but only so that we may come to know and live and have our being in the Living God and His kingdom.

Today we commemorate St Mary Magdalen. Many have a distorted idea about her; there are apocryphal and legendary stories about the saint. Gnostics and other heretics in the second century

latched onto her when they produced their false gospels, rejected by the Church from the canon of scripture. In the western Christian tradition, Mary Magdalen became identified with the repentant sinner who anointed our Lord before His passion. The early mediaeval mind even developed all kinds of romantic legends around her. The name of her place of origin, Magdala, became in English the word, *maudlin*, meaning overly-sentimental, emotional, tearful and lachrymose. She thus became the epitome of the ascetic penitent, as shown in all those Renaissance paintings.

None of this is part of our Orthodox tradition, where Mary Magdalen is venerated with the title *isa-apostolos*, equal to the Apostles. She was one of the women disciples of Christ who from their own resources provided for His expenses during the time of His public ministry. She must at one time have been highly disturbed, a victim of that demonic oppression that was rife in Israel at the time. The Devil, it seems, clearly increased his activity to contend with the incarnate Christ. Christ, we are told, had delivered Mary from seven devils.

Perhaps, at first, even *she* fell victim to that common tendency to cling on to the healer. But at Orthros this morning, the Eothinon (dawn) gospel told the story of her encounter with the risen Christ. At first she tries to cling to Him, wanting, perhaps, to hang on to the man, albeit the Messiah of Israel, who had delivered her. '*She turned,*' says St John in his gospel. '*And said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").*' But what does Christ reply? '*Do not hold Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.*' Christ was ascending where He was before Time; there was no point in Mary's clinging to the earthly Christ anymore; no more than there is for us.

It was after Pentecost that Mary Magdalen, alongside all the Church gathered in Jerusalem, fully realised that Christ was not just the Messiah of the Jews, but recognised the divinity that is His from all eternity as well. The Proclaimer became the proclaimed; the Preacher, the one preached. No doubt, those places in this world where Christ trod the ground, have indeed been remembered in the mind and memory of the Church, and there is no more sacred site on

earth than the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem where Mary was the first to encounter the risen Christ. Pilgrimage to holy places does indeed give us tangible contact with the spiritual realities beyond. But wonderful as they are, we cannot remain for ever in those sacred precincts: the pilgrim has to return home.

Those five thousand with their families, whom Christ fed miraculously in an image of the great Messianic banquet, would have made Him their earthly king, had Jesus not dismissed them hurriedly and departed in a boat to the other side. St John tells us this, in his version of that story: binding the Messiah, the Christ, to an earthly, a political, kingdom. But His kingdom is *not* of this world.

As St Paul says, when he wrote again to the Corinthians: *'Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer.* [II Cor.5:16] Thus it was that Mary Magdalen was, by the grace of the Spirit, able to move on. She was the first to proclaim the resurrection when she said to the apostles, *'I have seen the Lord.'* In Orthodox Tradition she preached the same message as far as Rome and it is from her that the tradition of painting our paschal eggs red is said to have come, as a sign of the new life that is ours in the rising of Christ from the dead.

May we, who feast here today, not at an earthly supper but in this foretaste of the heavenly wedding banquet of the Lamb of God, take hold of our own calling. We were healed; we were restored and forgiven in Christ, not to lie supine in our own comfort; not in order to cling on to what is passing away, but, like the Magdalen, to proclaim to all that Christ is risen. In company with the Apostles, there can be for us no anodyne religion, no cheap grace; we need nothing of Karl Marx' 'opiate' to ease our pain. For whether we are clergy or laity, in the Church we were baptized not just for our own salvation but for that of others as well.