Reflections for this Weekend

The parable of the Prodigal Son, is not primarily a story about moral failure and forgiveness, but a revelation of the **Father's heart** and the true nature of repentance as a return to communion. This parable stands at the very center of the Gospel because it reveals who God is and who we are called to become. In the East, it is read not as a courtroom drama, but as a **homecoming**.

The younger son's departure is more than youthful rebellion; it is a rupture of communion. By demanding his inheritance, he treats the father as though he were already dead. Eastern theology understands sin not first as rule-breaking, but as separation from the Source of life. Leaving the father's house is leaving the space of love, protection, and identity.
What follows, the famine, the degradation, the hunger, is the natural consequence of life lived apart from God. Outside communion, even abundance becomes emptiness.

The turning point of the parable is expressed in a profoundly Eastern phrase: "he came to himself." Repentance (*metanoia*) is not self-condemnation but **the recovery of true identity**. The son remembers who he is and where he belongs. His planned confession is still shaped by a servant mentality, revealing that even in repentance we often underestimate the mercy of God. Yet the journey home, however imperfect, opens the heart to grace.

The father's response overturns all human logic. He sees the son "while he was still far off," runs to him, embraces him, and restores him. In Eastern theology, this is the movement of divine condescension (*synkatabasis*). God does not wait passively for perfect repentance; He rushes toward even the smallest movement of the heart. The robe, ring, and sandals are not rewards but signs of **restored sonship**. What was lost is not merely forgiven, it is healed.

The feast that follows is deeply Eucharistic. Joy erupts not because the son has proven himself worthy, but because communion has been restored. "This son of mine was dead and has come to life again." Salvation here is resurrection. The Father does not erase the past; He transforms it into the place where mercy is revealed. In the Eastern Catholic understanding, heaven rejoices not in punishment avoided, but in life restored.

The elder son, however, reveals another form of lostness. He never left the house, yet his heart is distant. His obedience is contractual, not filial. He lives as a servant, not as a son.

(continue to page 2)

(continue from page 1)

Eastern spirituality recognizes this as a subtler but equally dangerous alienation: righteousness without joy, obedience without love. The elder son's resentment exposes a heart that measures rather than loves, compares rather than rejoices.

The father's response to the elder son is as gentle and revealing as his welcome of the younger. "All that is mine is yours." Communion has never been withheld. The tragedy is not that the elder son is excluded, but that he refuses to enter the joy. In the Eastern vision, salvation cannot be forced. God invites, pleads, and waits, but the heart must choose to enter the feast.

This parable ultimately reveals that both sons are in need of conversion. One must return from rebellion; the other from self-righteousness. The Father goes out to meet both, because divine love is inexhaustible and seeks all without distinction.

For our daily life, the Gospel calls us to examine where we stand. Have we wandered far and forgotten our true home? Or have we remained outwardly faithful while inwardly living without joy? The Church, especially in the season of repentance, places this Gospel before us to remind us that God desires not slaves, but sons and daughters; not fear, but communion.

The Prodigal Son is ultimately about **the feast of return**. Repentance is the path, mercy is the embrace, and joy is the sign that the Kingdom has already begun. To enter the Father's house is to discover that we were never meant to live anywhere else.

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With grateful hearts, we warmly welcome His Grace, **Bishop Most Reverend John Pazak,** CSSR, who has graciously agreed to celebrate the Divine Liturgies on February 1 and Sunday, February 8 during the absence of Fr. Hugo.
We receive him with open hearts and thankful for his pastoral care, prayerful presence, and loving service to our community.
May the Lord bless his ministry among us abundantly, and may our time together be filled with grace, joy, and spiritual renewal.

Mark on your calendar!!!!

A gentle reminder to all our parishioners that during the Great Fast we will celebrate the **Presanctified Divine Liturgy each Wednesday in English** and **each Friday in Ukrainian**. Both services will begin at **6:00 p.m.**

All are warmly encouraged to take part in these beautiful Lenten liturgies, a sacred opportunity for prayer, repentance, and spiritual renewal as we journey together toward Pascha..

The courage to come back and allow God to hug us!

There is a sacred fear that arises when the soul stands at the threshold of return. It is not the fear of punishment, but the fear of being seen completely. To come back to God is to step out of hiding, to leave behind the carefully constructed shadows where we have learned to survive without love. Eastern spirituality understands this moment as the most decisive struggle of the heart, not between good and evil, but between concealment and communion. The soul hesitates not because God is dangerous, but because intimacy is.

We wander not always by rebellion, but often by exhaustion. Over time, prayer becomes heavy, hope becomes thin, and the heart learns to protect itself by distance. Yet God does not experience our absence as offense; He experiences it as longing. In the language of the Fathers, God pursues us not by force but by patience. His mercy is not reactive; it is constant, like breath. When we finally turn back, we do not awaken God's love we awaken our awareness of it.

The courage to return is born when the soul dares to believe that God's gaze is healing, not humiliating. Shame fractures the heart, dividing it into parts that can be shown and parts that must remain hidden. But God's embrace is unifying. He does not love us in fragments. When we come back, He gathers the scattered pieces of our being, not to correct them first, but to hold them together in His presence. This is why the Eastern Church calls salvation *theosis* not moral improvement, but participation in divine life.

In the stillness of hesychia, the heart begins to remember its true home. Silence becomes a place where God waits, not with explanations, but with nearness. The Jesus Prayer, simple, repetitive, almost childlike, teaches the soul how to return again and again without drama: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." Each repetition is a step closer, a softening of resistance, a consent to be found. Mercy here is not a verdict; it is an embrace.

We often think repentance must be painful to be real. Yet in the East, repentance is described as luminous sorrow a grief that is already filled with hope. Tears are not signs of failure but of thawing. The heart weeps not because it is condemned, but because it is finally safe enough to feel. To allow God to hug us means allowing Him to touch the places we armored long ago, the places where trust once broke and never fully healed.

Christ reveals the shape of this divine embrace on the Cross. His arms are extended not in accusation but in invitation. He does not wait for humanity to climb back to Him; He descends into our exile. In Eastern theology, the descent into Hades is not an afterthought it is the final proof that there is no place where God will not go to retrieve His beloved. When we return,

(continue to page 4)

(continue from page 3)
we are not crossing an unfamiliar distance; we are stepping into a space already occupied by grace.

The soul resists this hug because it dismantles self-justification. Before God, excuses fall silent. Not because God silences us, but because His presence renders them unnecessary.
In the embrace of God, the need to defend oneself disappears. One realizes that salvation was never about proving worth, but about consenting to love. This consent is the deepest act of freedom the human person can make.

Our theology insists that God does not erase our wounds; He transfigures them.
The risen Christ still bears scars, now radiant. Likewise, when God embraces us, He does not pretend our history never happened. He takes it into Himself and fills it with light. What once caused shame becomes a place of compassion. What once isolated us becomes the very point where we can love others without judgment.

To come back is not a single moment but a rhythm. We return daily, sometimes hourly, often wordlessly. Each return requires courage because each return asks us to trust again. Yet over time, the soul learns that God's arms do not tighten to restrain, but open wider to receive. The fear of being overwhelmed by God's love slowly gives way to rest.

In the end, the courage to allow God to hug us is the courage to stop running from tenderness. It is the courage to believe that the ground beneath our feet is mercy, that the air around us is grace, and that the One we feared to face is the One who has been carrying us all along. When we finally rest in that embrace, we discover that return was never about distance it was about awakening to the love that never left.

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Pastoral Council Update.

On January 28, the newly formed Pastoral Council held its first meeting via Zoom.
During the meeting, Martha Baron-Tabak was selected as the new Chair of the Council.
The members engaged in a fruitful exchange of ideas and reflected on the discussion topics proposed by Fr. Hugo.
The Council discerned parish pastoral priorities for the year ahead, focusing on our spiritual and pastoral goals, including liturgical life, evangelization, family ministry, youth, outreach, and the wise stewardship of time and resources. Discussion also centered on strengthening parish community and engagement by welcoming new parishioners, re-engaging inactive members, and fostering unity across generations and cultures.
The Council reviewed faith formation for all ages, considering opportunities for growth such as Bible studies, retreats, and small faith-sharing groups. Attention was also given to pastoral care and outreach to the sick, elderly, grieving, homebound, and those facing financial or emotional hardship.
The meeting concluded with discussion on communication, transparency, and collaboration within the parish, as well as leadership development, encouraging greater parishioner participation, long-term sustainability of parish programs, and creating ways to listen to parishioner feedback.
The members of the Pastoral Council are: Sean Morrissey, John Paul Parks, Laurel Retay-Nagle, David Smush, Megan Smush, and Martha Baron-Tabak. Each member has volunteered to serve the parish or was prayerfully invited to join the Council.
If any parishioner has questions, ideas, or suggestions, please feel free to share them with any member of the Pastoral Council. If you are interested in joining the Council, you would be very welcome.
Please keep the Pastoral Council in your prayers as they begin this important work for the life of our parish.

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Sunday Divine Liturgy:
8:50 a.m. The Third Hour
And
Prayer Service for Peace in Ukraine.
9:30a.m. Divine Liturgy

Religious Education
September - May

Sacraments Penance:
Sunday before Liturgies
or by appointment

Baptism - Matrimony
In most instances
six-month membership
required

Funerals
Membership of an
immediate family member
required

Communion to the Homebound
If you or your family members are confined to a health center or are homebound, please contact Fr. Hugo directly so that arrangements can be made for his visitation.

Sunday, February 1
"Sunday of the Prodigal Son"
Epistle: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. **Gospel:** Luke 15:11-32.
8:50 a.m. The Third Hour and
Prayer Service for Peace in Ukraine
9:30 a.m. Gods blessings and good health for all our parishioners and friends
Blessing of Candles

Monday, February 2
"The Encounter of our Lord Jesus Christ"
Epistle: Hebrews 7:7-17. **Gospel:** Luke 2:22-40.

Tuesday, February 3
"The Holy and Just Simeon and the Prophetess Anna"
Epistle: 1 John 3:11-20. Gospel: Mark 14:10-42.
6:30 p.m. Evening prayers via Zoom

Wednesday, February 4
"Our Venerable Father Isidore of Pelusium"
Epistle: 1 John 3:21-4:6 Gospel: Mark 14:43-15:1.

Thursday, February 5
"The Holy Martyr Agatha"
Epistle: 1 John 4:20-5:21. Gospel: Mark 15:1-15.
6:30 p.m. Evening prayers via Zoom

Friday, February 6
"The Venerable Father Boucolus, Bishop of Smyrna"
Epistle: 2 John 1:1-13. **Gospel:** Mark 15:22-25; 33-41.

Saturday, February 7
"Saturday before Meatfare Sunday"
"All Souls Saturday"
Epistle: 1 Corinthians 10:23-28 **Gospel:** Luke 21:8-9; 25-27; 33-36
6:30 p.m. Evening prayers via Zoom

Sunday, February 8
"Meatfare Sunday" **(Of the Fearful Judgment)**
"The Holy Great-Martyr Theodore the General"
Epistle: 1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2 **Gospel** Matthew 25:31-46.
8:50 a.m. The Third Hour and
Prayer Service for Peace in Ukraine
9:30 a.m. Gods blessings and good health for all our parishioners and friends