

SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

by Father Frank Marangos

“Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.”
Acts 12:7

Christians who trust in God are spiritually liberated. This is one of the lessons that can be gleaned from a thoughtful reflection of the scriptural account of Saint Peter’s miraculous escape from imprisonment (Acts 12). In fact, one may correctly assert that it was the angel of trust – of faith in God – that liberated Peter from his bodily fetters. Trust delivered Moses and his fellow Israelites from the pursuing Egyptians at the Red Sea. Trust sustained Joseph while he languished in Pharaoh’s prison. Trust gave young David victory over Goliath and answered Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the whale. It was this same trust in God that emboldened the Apostle Peter’s faith before the Sanhedrin and finally unlocked the iron gate of his unjust captivity.

The detailed story of Saint Peter’s chained imprisonment is described in the 12th chapter of the Book of Acts. King Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, was fearful of the early Christian community. In fact, he murdered James, the brother of John the Evangelist, and imprisoned Peter. Agrippa was so terrified of Peter’s societal influence, that he had him shackled between two heavy chains and guarded by a garrison of “four quaternions (16) of soldiers” (Acts 12:4-6). Miraculously, on the night prior to his execution, an angel was sent by God to release Peter from his harsh confinement.

It is significant that Saint Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, informs us that Saint Peter’s escape took place “while prayer was being offered on his behalf by the local Christian community” (Acts 12:5). It is also amazing that, while most of us would have been wide awake – tossing and turning, worrying about our dangerous situation – Peter was so confident that God would heed the prayers of his friends, that his rescuing angel had difficulty waking him from a sound sleep (Acts 12:7)!

Holy Tradition indicates that the chains that miraculously fell from Peter’s wrists were gathered and secretly venerated during the first three centuries. The members of the early Christian community rightly believed that, like the clothing, aprons, handkerchiefs and shadows of the Apostles, the chains of Saint Peter would likewise have extraordinary healing powers (Acts 19:11-12). Beginning in the 4th Century, these and other chains from similar imprisonments were venerated during special Feast Days in Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome as they had become grace-filled symbols of early Christian trusteeship.

It is significant that the liturgical traditions of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches both include an annual feast day known as the Veneration of the Chains of Saint Peter. In fact, this commemoration took place last week (Jan 16). It is this trust in God that continues to give these holy chains the power to extend the Grace of God to others! This ancient commemoration provides a valuable opportunity for all Orthodox Christians and, in particular, parish leaders to examine the spiritual condition of our respective personal, pastoral, and/or administrative responsibilities.

According to Saint John Chrysostom, “the reason why the devil plunges us into thoughts of despair, is to cut off hope which is towards God, the safe anchor, the foundation of our life, the guide of the way which leads to heaven, and the salvation of perishing souls.” Without spiritual trust, Christians are susceptible to this type of despair. Alternatively, “trust in God,” continues Chrysostom, “is like a strong cord suspended from the heavens that supports our souls, gradually drawing towards that world on high to those who cling firmly to it, lifting them above the tempest of the evils of this life.”

The message is clear. Like Peter, contemporary Christians must learn to humbly entrust our burdens to the wise and loving sovereignty of God. Faith must be anchored in our confidence in God. We must firmly believe that the Grace of the Holy Trinity can and will unshackle the chains of those that trust in Him! Only in this fashion can we experience spiritual liberation.