

**Fourth Sunday of Great and Holy Lent.
Commemoration of Our Father among the Saints, John Climacus.**

“If the Holy Spirit is peace of soul, as He is said to be, and as He is in reality, and if anger is disturbance of heart, as it actually is and as it is said to be, then nothing so prevents His presence in us as anger.”

— St. John Climacus (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 8.14)

Today, the fourth Sunday of Lent, is one of two commemorations of St John Κλίμακος , (Klimakos, Climacus), of the *Ladder*, (c.579 – 649). Little detail is known of his life, and much of that was supplied in a later biography by the monk, Daniel of the Raithu monastery on the Red Sea. Although Daniel’s work is presented as a *vita*, a life or biography of the Saint, he has to admit that he knows nothing of John’s origins. There was a generally held opinion that he lived in the 6th century AD, although it is now considered more likely that it was the 7th century.

However, it is not disputed that he was a monk of the Vatos monastery, what is now called St Catherine’s Monastery at Mt Sinai, The God-trodden Mountain, and that he gained a reputation for great holiness and wisdom. He entered monastic life at the early age of sixteen. After his spiritual father died, he became a hermit at the foot of Mt Sinai. Many years later, when he was seventy-five, the monks of Sinai urged him to become their abbot.

Of the spiritual works attributed to him, the most famous must be *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. In this treatise John, taking the image of Jacob’s Ladder in Genesis (28,10-17), likens the virtuous life to a ladder which one climbs by acquiring certain virtues and overcoming their corresponding vices.

The first seven rungs of the ladder recall the virtues necessary for the ascetic life, steps 8 to 26 consider how to overcome vices and how to strengthen their opposite virtues. The final four steps treat the higher virtues. However, even more so than prayer (προσευχή), stillness (ήσυχία), and even dispassion (ἀπαθεία), there is the last step which leads to Christ, and that step is love (ἀγάπη); the love extolled by Jesus in the Gospels. (Jn 13:16; Mt 5:43-46)

It is of this love that Tertullian, a Christian lawyer in the second century, writes, “What marks us in the eyes of our enemies is our loving kindness. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another’ ” (*Apology* 39).

As well as icons of St John Climacus, one often sees didactic or “lesson teaching” icons showing several categories of people trying to climb the Ladder; some reach Christ at the top, whilst others fall off at various stages as they succumb to temptation. Perhaps, it would be good for each of us to ask ourselves, at from which step of the Ladder I would fall? What is my most dangerous weakness?

The Ladder has been for Eastern Christians, Catholic and Orthodox, what *The Imitation of Christ* has been for the Latin West. It is in *The Ladder* that we encounter the custom of keeping a written spiritual diary; a custom followed by many saintly individuals in both East and West.

The Ladder is much read during Lent, in churches and monasteries, by individuals and groups. In some places St John Climacus is invoked by those who have little success with dieting! – and, perhaps we could add, Lenten fasting.

St John became especially popular in Russia, where there are a number of churches dedicated to him.

St John Climacus is also commemorated in both the Eastern and Western Churches, on 30 March.

Archdeacon Anthony Lawrence