

## St Moses The Black- God's mercy and Forgiveness



Aim: Emphasis to the class that

1. God's mercy and forgiveness is great and can absolve us of all sin, giving us another chance.
2. It is better not to fall in sin as the torment is great even after repentance

Spiritual preparation:

Our own salvation is dependant on Christ, who washes away our sins. The ease with which Christ forgave St Moses the Black should encourage us to run to Him always, but the struggles that St Moses had as a result of his past sins should remind us that avoidance is better and to seek Christ's help to prevent a fall.

Saying of St Moses the Black:

- The Fear of God drives away all vice and discontentment drives away the Fear of God. As the termites do to the wood, so does vice to the soul.
- Three things struggle with the mind: neglect, laziness, forsaking prayer.

Verses:

- "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleans us from all unrighteousness" 1 John 1:9
- "For You, Lord, are good and ready to forgive, And abundant in mercy to all those who call upon you" Ps 86:5

References:

- <http://www.stantonymonastery.org>
- <http://www.premontre.org>- St Moses the Black Priory
- <http://abbey.suscopts.org>
- <http://bibletools.org>

### Lesson layout:

1. Story of St Moses the Black
2. How great is the forgiveness of God?
3. Will we ever fall into sin again after repentance?
4. What is the consequence of sin?

### Lesson introduction:

By now the class will be able to tell you the story of St Moses the Black – let them recount what they know and fill in patches in their knowledge. Ask them:

- What makes him so special in the monasteries that many monks take his name when they are consecrated?
- Is he so different from us that we cannot do what he did? Is he just another saint with unattainable qualities or can he be any one of us?

The story of St Moses is outlined at the end of the lesson as a refresher and has been taken from St Moses the Black Priory – one of the oldest Roman Catholic orders– it is very similar to what we know with a few extra accounts of his life.

The rest of the lesson will concentrate on Forgiveness and mercy and the struggles thereafter for man. We should continually emphasize that however deep our sins are God will still forgive– so great is His mercy but we suffer as a consequence of our actions thereafter.

### What is the point of repentance and confession if I am to fall again?

We are feeble humans, and we cannot attain right away such a firmness which makes falling into voluntary sins impossible. If we cannot reach such steadfastness in virtue right away, should we surrender to vice? Or should we stop confessing? Which is better – to roll in the mud, or to pick yourself up after each fall and go on with the hope that someday you may reach the shore of virtue? If you do not confess, you remain in the mud. If you confess, you pick yourself up from the mud and clean yourself. "But why should I get up if tomorrow I will fall again?" you say. When you fall again, then

get up again! Every day begin all over again! This is undoubtedly better than falling out of the habit of getting up.

- A young monk complained to the great ascetic Abba Sisoës: "Abba, what should I do? I fell." The elder answered: "Get up!" The monk said: "I got up, and I fell again!" The elder replied: "Get up again!" But the young monk asked: "For how long should I get up when I fall?" "Until your death," answered Abba Sisoës. This wise dialogue should be remembered by all of us who want to change but, deceived by the devil, constantly return to our previous sins. Every time we fall into a transgression, we must get up. The "getting up"– this is Confession.
- St. John Chrysostom says: "Repentance opens the heavens for man, takes him to Paradise, overcomes the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin every day, then offer repentance every day! When there are rotten parts in old houses, we replace the parts with new ones, and we do not stop caring for the houses. In the same way, you should reason for yourself: if today you have defiled yourself with sin, immediately clean yourself with repentance."
- For the washing away of bodily dirtiness God has given water. And for the washing of spiritual foulness, God has given the grace of the holy Sacrament of Confession. Every man, when he dirties his hands, washes them. No one says: "I will not wash my hands any more, because I will get them dirty again!" But why is it then that many people say, "I will not go to Confession, because I will sin again tomorrow!" It is clear that the enemy of our salvation is enticing us not to wash our souls, so that he can gain power over them.

But we must not give in to such satanic suggestions; we should confess frequently, because frequent washing produces a taste for cleanliness in us.

Leave your house unswept, uncleaned, and unventilated for one year! Will it not turn into a pigsty? Now think about what the soul of a man is like when he has not cleaned it through Confession, not only for a year, but for twenty, forty, sixty, or seventy years...

- Abba Mios was asked by a soldier: "Father, Does God accept the repentance of the sinner?" The Elder, after counseling him with many instructive words, suddenly asked him: "Tell me, my beloved, when you tear your uniform, do you throw it away?" "No," the soldier answered, "I sew it and use it anew again." Then Abba Mios also thoughtfully told him: "If you take pity on your clothing, will not God take pity on His own creation?"

However, even repentance will not let you escape from the consequences of your sin:

Feel free to do whatever you want to do. Nothing bad can happen to you. After all, don't we have the freedom to do what we want to do without any interference from anyone, especially God? So enjoy, nothing of any consequence will happen to you.

This is the lie that we have been told since the very beginning of humanity when Satan presented the deception to Eve. And Eve being deceived, submitted to Satan. Here are some biblical examples:

- Example 1

Read Genesis 3:7-11

This account of Adam's and Eve's reaction to their sin demonstrates that sin destroys innocence.

Were two people ever more innocent at the beginning of their lives than Adam and Eve? Immediately after sinning, though, they felt shame because of their nakedness, and they doubly showed their guilt by hiding from God. Do the truly innocent have any need to hide? Do the innocent need to feel shame?

Sin leaves a tarnish on a person's mind so that he does not look at life in quite the same way anymore. David expresses how this tarnish affected him in Psalm 40:12, "My iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to look up." Paul later explains, "To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and

unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled" (Titus 1:15).

Matthew 18:1, touches on innocence and its destruction. It starts with a question from the disciples: "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus replies that unless we become as little children, we will not be in the Kingdom of Heaven. Is not the beauty of their innocence and the harmless vulnerability of little children a major reason why we find them so adorable? They produce no harm, shame, or guilt. But what happens as they become adults? They become sophisticated, worldly, cosmopolitan, cynical, suspicious, sarcastic, prejudiced, self-centered, cool, uninvolved, and many other negative things. They also seem to lose their zest for life. Sin does that.

- Example 2:

The story of David and Bathsheba typifies the consequences of sin and the various types of consequences that exist. The **immediate consequences** of sin are a loss of fellowship with God and the resultant separation can be extremely painful. Anyone who has ever had an intimate relationship with God will understand how unbearable it is to have the harmony in the relationship broken. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation," David begged God in the heart rending 51st psalm.

God answered David's prayer and restored him to salvation and fellowship just as he restores us when we turn to him in true repentance. But there are often **future consequences** as well, with shame, suffering and sorrow following us for the rest of our lives. David's reputation was forever tarnished by what he did. Even more seriously, five people died as a direct result of David's sin leading in untold misery for many others. Four were David's own children, including the child he had with Bathsheba.

And then, of course, there are the **eternal consequences** of sin. Paul puts it very succinctly in his first letter to the Corinthians. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad," he writes.

While this illustrates the consequences to us personally, many of us don't realize how badly sin affects the world we live in and how greatly we are responsible for all the suffering we see in it.

A beautiful story I heard recently might make this clear.

There was once a boy who was very naughty. His father despaired of him ever mending his ways until he struck upon an idea of how he might possibly change his son's heart. He called the lad to him and told him that every time the boy did something bad he would hammer a nail into the fence surrounding the house; every time the boy was good, he would take a nail out.

In a few weeks the fence was covered with nails. One day as the boy saw the fence, something finally moved inside him and he determined (like David, me and several others I know) to never do anything bad again. Barring a few falls from time to time, he was successful in his desire to change and very soon there were no more nails on the fence.

The boy went to his father unable to resist crowing about how there were no more nails in the fence. "I am very proud of you, son," his father said, "but I want you to look at something." He took the boy out and showed him the fence, scarred by the hundreds of holes the nails had made ...

Contrition before God and the need for not depending upon our piety and our strength to get out of sin:

Father Moses increased in piety and in the struggle with himself to a great extent; but in spite of these desperate measures, the vigilance and the defeat of the self, he could not avoid imagining the lustful ghosts that were intensified as his struggle increased. His additional abstentions were probably without the permission of his spiritual mentor, for when he went to him to complain about his situation, he said to him, "My son, stop fighting the devils for the human being's strength has its limits. However, if God does not have mercy upon you and He alone gives victory over them, you will never overpower them. Go now and submit yourself to God with repentance before Him. Persevere in humility, He will have mercy upon you." Moses answered, "I trust in God in whom I have placed all my hope that I be constantly armed against the devils, and never stop fighting them until they depart from me." When St. Isidorus saw this faith in him, he said, "And I also believe in my Lord Jesus Christ, and in the name of Jesus Christ, from this moment the devils will stop fighting you." He added, "Go to the Holy church and partake of the Holy Sacraments." St. Moses continued to do as the Elder had said with perseverance, and God gave him a great blessing, humility and serenity. The power of thought came upon him, and from that moment Moses lived in peace and grew in wisdom.

## **Extra Resources:**

### Summary of the life of St Moses the Black:

One of the early monks in the period of desert Christian monasticism was a Black African (Nubian) now honoured as St. Moses the Black.

He had been a slave of a government official in Egypt who discharged him for theft and suspected murder. He became the leader of a gang of bandits who roamed the Nile Valley and had the reputation for being associated with terror and violence.

Moses was a large and imposing figure; he became rather notorious for his escapades. On one occasion, a barking sheep dog prevented Moses from executing a planned robbery, so he swore vengeance on the owner. Carrying out his threat, he approached the hut of his victim from the opposite side of the Nile and, placing his weapons between his teeth, swam the river. The owner of the dog heard the approach, so he hid along the river bank, thus escaping disaster, Moses, not finding the shepherd, took four rams from the flock, towed them back across the river, flayed them, sold the skins for wine, cooked the best parts, and feasted before walking back 50 miles to his camp.

On one occasion, when he sought to hide from local authorities, he took shelter with some monks in a monastic colony in Skete in the western desert near Alexandria. The dedication of their lives and their peace and contentment seem to have influenced him deeply. Eventually, he gave up his old way of life and became a monk himself.

The conversion of Moses was not instantaneous; he had a rather difficult time adjusting to regular monastic discipline. His flair for adventure remained with him. Once, while living in a small cell, he was attacked by four robbers. Much to their surprise, Moses fought and overpowered them, tied them together and dragged them to the chapel where the other monks were praying. He dumped the crew in front of the other monks and exclaimed that he did not think it "Christian" to hurt the intruders. He asked what he should do with them. According to tradition, the overwhelmed robbers repented, were converted, and themselves became monks under the influence of Moses.



He was zealous of everything he undertook, but became discouraged when he concluded he was not becoming a perfect monk advanced in all the degrees of spiritual perfection. Early one morning before dawn, St. Isadore, abbot of the monastery, took Brother Moses to the roof and together they watched the first rays of the dawn come over the horizon. They stayed there until the new day had begun. Then Isidore said, "Only slowly do the rays of the sun drive away the night and usher in a new day and, thus, only slowly does one become a perfect contemplative."

A certain wealthy, high-ranking official came to Sketis with a large caravan. He bestowed gifts upon the monks and inquired where he might locate the elder Moses. After receiving directions, the official set out to visit the Ethiopian monk. Moses, perceiving in the Spirit the approach of the official, went out to meet him, in the guise of a traveler.

Encountering the dusty elder along the way, the official asked him if he knew the whereabouts of Moses. "What do you want with that troublemaker?" the elder asked him. "Stay away from him. He will do you no good." The official, stunned and scandalized, returned to Sketis and told the monks of his conversation on route. They could not believe that anyone would speak so about Moses and asked the official to describe the man he met. The official described him as being tall, white-haired, and black, with ragged and dusty clothing. Hearing this, the relieved monks informed the official that the monk he had conversed with was none other than Moses himself. The official was somewhat chagrined and realized that Moses wished to avoid the praise and recognition of men. And so, edified, he returned to his home.

The humble Moses also proved to be effective as a prophetic spiritual leader. One day the abbot ordered everyone to fast during a particular week. During that time, some brothers came to visit Moses, and he cooked a meal for them. Seeing the smoke, the neighboring monks told the abbot that Moses had broken the command. But knowing his remarkable way of life, these same monks, when they came to confront Moses, observed, "You did not keep the commandment of men, but it was so that you might keep the commandment of God."

In another incident related in the sources, one of the brothers committed a fault. A council met and Moses was invited, but refused to attend. Someone came to him to let him know the others were waiting, at which Moses went to the meeting. He took a basket of sand with a hole in it and carried it on his shoulder. When he arrived, the others came out to meet him asking, "What is this?" Moses replied, "My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, but today I am coming to judge the errors of another." Hearing that, they said no more to the erring brother, but forgave him.

Moses became the spiritual leader of a colony of hermits in the desert near Skete. At some time, he had been ordained a priest –an uncommon phenomenon at that period for desert monks and founded a monastery of 75 monks, the same number as his former group of thieves. When Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria, ordained him a priest and put the white priestly garment over his shoulders and he said, "Now Father Moses, the black man is made white." Father Moses replied, "Only outside. God knows that inwardly I am still dark!"

He was known for his wisdom, humility, love, and non-judgment of others. When he was 75 years old, about the year 407, word came that a group of renegades planned to attack the colony. The brothers wished to defend themselves, but Moses forbade such action. He told them to retreat rather than take up the sword. He and seven others stayed on to greet the invaders with open arms, but all were martyred by the bandits. A modern interpretation honors St. Moses the Black as an apostle of nonviolence.

### A conversation between God and the devil regarding His mercy:

A certain brother, overcome by the passion of immorality, sinned every day. However, each time, with tears and prayers, he would fall before the Master and Lord and receive forgiveness from Him. And as soon as he had repented, the next day, being misled again by shameful habit, he would fall to sin.

Afterwards, having sinned, he would go to the Church, where he would prostrate himself before the honorable and revered Icon of our Lord Jesus Christ and tearfully confess to Jesus: "Lord, have mercy upon me and take away from me this fearful temptation, for it troubles me fiercely and wounds me with the bitter taste of the pleasures. O my Master, cleanse my person once more, that I may gaze upon Thine Icon and see Thy holy form and the sight of Thy face, brighter than the sun, that my heart might be sweetened and thankful."

And though his lips had just whispered these words, no sooner would he leave the Church than he would fall once again to sin.

Despite this, however, he did not despair of his salvation, but, returning from his sinful deed, would cry out in the Church the same words to God, to the Lord, Who loves mankind, adding the following: "My Lord, I swear to Thee on my word that I shall no longer commit this sin. Only forgive me, Good and Most Merciful Lord, whatever sins I have committed from the beginning to this moment."

No sooner would he utter these awe-inspiring words, than he would find himself the captive of this evil sin. Let no one cease to marvel at the sweet love of God towards mankind and at His boundless goodness, with which He each day tolerated the uncorrected and evil transgression and ingratitude of the brother. Indeed, God, because of the greatness of His mercy, persistently accepted the repentance of that sinful brother and his inevitable return. For this happened not for one or two or three years, but for more than ten years.

Do you see, my brother, the measureless forbearance and boundless love of the Master? How He continually endures, showing to us kindness, tolerating our terrible transgressions and sins? And

what evokes astonishment and wonderment with regard to the rich mercies of God is that He did not become wrathful with the brother in question, though the brother, agreeing not to fall to sin again, continually broke his word.

At any rate, one day when all that we have described again occurred, the brother, having fallen to sin, rushed to the Church, lamenting, groaning, and crying with anguish, to invoke the mercy of God, that He might have compassion on him and take him from the sin of immorality.

No sooner had he called on God, the lover of man, than the Devil, that evil of old, destroyer of our souls, seeing that he could gain nothing, since whatever he accomplished by sin, the brother expunged by his repentance, became infuriated and appeared visibly before the brother. Facing the Icon of Christ, the Devil said to our compassionate Savior: "What will become of the two of us, Jesus Christ? Your sympathy for this sinner defeats me and takes the ground I have gained, since you keep accepting this dissolute man and prodigal who daily mocks you and scorns your authority. Indeed, why is it that you do not burn him up, but, rather, tolerate and put up with him? ... It is because one day you intend to condemn all of the adulterers and the dissolute and you will destroy all sinners.

"Actually, you are not a just Judge. But by whim your power is sometimes applied leniently and overlooks things. So, while I was cast from the heavens down to the abyss for a little breach of pride, to this fellow here, even though an immoral man and a prodigal, you calmly show your sympathy, just because he throws himself down in front of your Icon.

"In what way can you be called a just Judge, then? For, as I see it, you receive individual people with great kindness, but ignore justice in general."

The Devil said all of this, poisoned with great bitterness, whilst there poured forth from his nostrils a black flame.

Having said these things, he fell silent. A voice was heard in response, coming forth from the divine sanctuary, saying the following: "O, all-cunning and ruinous Dragon, are you yet not

satisfied with your evil and destructive desire to gobble up the world? Now you have even the nerve to try to do away with this man here, who has come with contrition to entreat the mercy of my compassion to devour him, too? Can you offer up enough sins that, by them, you can tilt the balance of justice against the precious blood which I shed on the Cross for this man? Behold my murder and death, which I endured for the forgiveness of his sins.

"You, when he turns again to sin, do not turn him away, but receive him with joy, neither chastising him nor preventing him from committing sin, out of the hope that you might win him over; but I, who am merciful and love mankind, who counselled my laudable Apostle, Peter, to forgive sins seven times seventy (St. Matthew 18:22), do I not show him mercy and compassion? Indeed, simply because he flees to me, I will not turn him away until I have won him over. Furthermore, I was crucified for sinners and for their salvation; my immaculate hands were nailed to the Cross, that those who so wish might take refuge in me and be saved. For this reason, then, I neither turn away nor reject anyone, even if he should fall many times a day and many times return to me; such a person will not leave my Temple saddened, for I came not to call the righteous, but to call sinners to repent."

During the time that this voice was heard, the Devil was fixed in his place, trembling and unable to run away. The voice then again began to say: "We have heard from all that you say, O Seducer, that I am not just; to the contrary, I am just beyond all. In whatever moral state I find a person, in that state I judge him. Look at this man who a few moments ago repented, having returned from sin and having fallen at my feet with a sincere resolution to abandon sin, and thereby having conquered you.

"Therefore, I will accept him immediately and save his soul, since he did not lose hope in his hard toil for salvation.

"Look how much he merits by his repentance before me, for which he is honored. As for you, let your hate be shred to pieces and you disgraced."

While this was being said, the repentant brother had thrown himself before the Icon of the Savior. With his face to the ground and lamenting, he surrendered his spirit to the Lord. At the same time

that the repentant brother departed to the Lord, a great tempest fell upon Satan, like a fire from Heaven, and devoured him. From this incident, my brothers, let us learn of the limitless compassion of God and of His love of man—a good Master we have—, that we might never again be disheartened by our sins, but rather look after our salvation with zeal.