

No Free Pass

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Isn't it possible to be saved even if you consciously sin throughout your life and never bother to repent? Couldn't you plan to live as you please and then confess everything on your deathbed, and gain salvation that way?

Some people claim that this kind of cynical plan could work. But on August 24 we remember a saint who shows us that it definitely cannot work. He is Saint Cosmas the Aetolian.

Born in the mountainous region of Aetolia, Greece in 1714, Cosmas was tutored in the Orthodox faith by an archdeacon during his childhood. Drawn to monasticism, he went to live in the Philotheou Monastery on Mount Athos.

Cosmas saw the effects of centuries of Turkish rule over Greece. The Church had been oppressed, and many people had had no churches, no spiritual teachers, and no priests to baptize them.

Cosmas received permission to travel around Greece, going on foot or by donkey to remote areas, and by ship to the islands. He taught the people, and established churches, schools, and charitable centers. The Orthodox Church declared Cosmas a saint in 1961.

Saint Cosmas taught that to be saved we must love each other. But he insisted that God is not satisfied with superficial love. He said:

"If you want to find perfect love, sell all your belongings, give them to the poor, and then go find a master and become a slave. Can you do this and be perfect?"

"You say this is too heavy? Then do something else. Don't sell yourself as a slave. Just sell your belongings and give them to the poor. Can you do it? Or do you find this too heavy a task?"

"All right, you cannot give away all your belongings. Then give half, or a third, or a fifth. Is even this too heavy? Then give one tenth. Can you do that? Is it still too heavy?"

"How about this? Don't sell yourself, or give a penny to the poor. Only do this: don't take your poor brother's coat, don't take his bread, don't persecute him, don't eat him alive. If you don't want to do him any good, at least do him no harm. Just leave him alone. Is this also too heavy?"

"You say you want to be saved. But how? How can we be saved if everything we are called to do is too heavy? We descend and descend until there is no place further down. God is merciful, yes, but He also has an iron rod."

So, according to Saint Cosmas, the "plan" of living as we please, sinning without repenting, and counting on a deathbed confession to save us, can't work. Living selfishly only means we will "descend and descend until there is no place further down." We will no longer be able to love God, or the people around us, because we are so used to caring only for ourselves. As for repenting, if we haven't practiced during our life, the time will come when we have simply forgotten how.