

THE HOLY ORTHODOX DIOCESE OF BOSTON AND NEW ENGLAND

Right Reverend Demetrius, Bishop

November 15/28, 2013
Sts. Guria, Shamuna, & Habib, Martyrs of Edessa

NATIVITY FAST ENCYCLICAL

Beloved faithful of the Holy Diocese of Boston,
Grace and peace to you from our Saviour Jesus Christ.

We now embark upon the holy season of the Nativity fast. Why do we fast?

First, because our Saviour tells us "watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation" (Mark 14:38). Secondly, because He tells us that "this kind [the demons] can go out only by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21). And thirdly, we fast for preparation of the holy feast of our Lord's Nativity.

Preparation in the sacramental life is important. We prepare to receive strength for our journey. We see where Christ is born and we participate in the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We prepare a place in our hearts, the cave and manger wherein Christ the King reclines.

In the hymnology of the feast of the Nativity we hear: "Come ye faithful let us all see where Christ is born". We will not see where Christ is born if we are not attentive and we do not respond to the invitation.

St Makarios of Corinth tells us with regards to this preparation (in particular preparing for Holy Communion):

"The Christian receives great benefit from the Divine Mysteries, both in his soul and in his body, before he communes, at the time when he communes, and after he has communed. Before he communes, he must make the necessary preparation, that is, he must confess to his spiritual father, correct himself, feel compunction, acquire inner attention, guard himself from passionate thoughts as far as possible, and also from every other vice. Similarly, he must exercise self-restraint, pray, be inwardly awake, become more devout, and do every other kind of good deed, reflecting what awesome king he is about to receive within himself especially if he considers

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that the grace which is given to him from Communion is proportionate to his preparation. It is evident that the more one makes such preparation, the more benefit he receives".

The Saint continues to instruct us after we have received the holy Mysteries: "After one has communed, reflecting what dreadful heavenly Mysteries he has received, he watches lest he dishonor the grace. He is cautious, circumspect, he guards his thoughts, begins a stricter and more virtuous life, and abstains as far as he can from every evil".

Each of us has to examine ourselves as to whether or not we take heed to the words of the Saint.

Furthermore, we must all be very cautious that we understand where we are when we are present in the Divine Services, particularly the Divine Liturgy.

The holy fathers with one voice give us the answer: We are in heaven.

But the holy fathers speak from their own experience. They knew very well that every baptized Christian has the ability to be present in heaven if we open the pathway of our heart to the grace of God. This is why the deacon tells us "Let us attend" over and over during the services. If we are not attentive, we do not obtain His grace.

The clergy have to be the first to show an example of attentiveness. They must realize that when they serve the Divine Liturgy they must do so with great devotion and attention. St. Symeon the New Theologian says that the priest should not serve unless he has prayed alone for an hour weeping over his own sins! After all, he offers the bloodless sacrifice "for his own sins, and for the ignorances of the people". The clergy should act with great reverence and should not talk at all during the Divine Liturgy, unless it is important. The priest acts as a mediator between God and man, he has boldness, and has an awesome and dreadful responsibility; and if he wishes God to bless him and his congregation, let him be the first to be attentive. The people will observe that, respect it, and learn from it.

So awesome is the responsibility of the priests that we are told to kiss the hand of a priest before we should kiss the hand of an angel, because the priest (repre-

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senting his bishop) is an instrument of grace by which the holy sacraments are performed.

Finally, I ask you all, as the spiritual father of the Diocese of Boston that we pray especially during this fast for our holy Church. We must pray that God would guide and direct the Hierarchs and pastors of our Church in North America and Greece, and that He grant lasting unity to all pious and Orthodox Christians throughout the world. May He unite all True Orthodox Christians into one body. Amen.

My gratitude to you all, for your dedication to the Holy Church, which has filled me with joy and hope. May God shower you with His mercy, bestowing rich blessings upon your families and upon all the parishes and all the faithful.

Your fervent suppliant before the Lord,


✠ Demetrius, Bishop of Boston and New England