



## HOLY METROPOLIS G.O.C. OF AMERICA ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ Γ.Ο.Χ. ΑΜΕΡΙΚΗΣ

Lenten Encyclical, 2016

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Cheese-Fare Sunday, February 29/March 13, 2016

Beloved clergy, monastics, and faithful of our Holy Metropolis,

The season of repentance has arrived. Great Lent is upon us. The seven weeks of fasting before the feast of feasts in honor of Christ our Savior are, according to the Holy Fathers, a ladder of spiritual perfection leading to heaven. This is because the commandment to fast was the first commandment God gave to the human race in Paradise. Whoever breaks this commandment falls away from God, but whoever keeps it attains rich gifts of the Holy Spirit and clearly beholds the mystery of Christ's Resurrection.

How should we keep the Fast, so that it is pleasing to God and soul-saving for us?

To answer this question there is no need to speculate or philosophize. It is necessary only to look into the book of books, the Holy Gospel.

In order to have a God-pleasing, spiritually beneficial Fast we must maintain a pure heart before the Lord. The proud man, the angry man, the resentful man, if he does not repent sincerely, cannot experience the consolation of the Fast. When the soul is consumed by the thought of past offenses it has suffered and filled with enmity, when it simmers with annoyance, irritation, and hostility, we cannot keep a God-pleasing fast, whatever we put or do not put into our mouths. If a person surrenders to these passions, his lips may repeat prayers, his ears may hear hymns, but these things only bury him deeper in his sin, for he heaps hypocrisy upon rancor.

A true, a pure fast is grounded in the purest, noblest feelings of love for one's neighbor, and such a fast heightens and perfects such feelings. During the course of Great Lent, it is essential to return in one's thoughts again and again, as often as possible, to the remembrance of what means pure Christian love for one's neighbor. The ancient Christians had the beautiful custom of putting aside whatever money they saved on food while fasting, and giving it to the poor. In the Gospel about the Dread Judgment, we heard Christ warn us that His mercy and compassion on the last day would be proportionate to our mercy and compassion for those in need. Let us imitate the first Christians in their love and care for the poor, and set aside a double portion of alms for them during the period of the Great Fast. At the same time, let us nurture in our hearts a perfect love for all the people with whom we have dealings in our everyday life, including those who frustrate or vex us.

If you want to make a good beginning to Great Lent and stay the course in the upright spirit that wins it rewards, then you must struggle to repent sincerely, to quell anger in your heart, to humble yourself, to stop making excuses for your failings and begin to make them for others.

When we justify ourselves and condemn the shortcomings of our neighbor, when we criticize and, worse still, berate, we quench the fire of holy love in our souls. If we want to reap the spiritual benefits of Great Lent, we must draw out the poison of ill will from our hearts, and emulate Christ, the Lover of mankind, in His universal, all-embracing love. Grace fills the heart that loves, adorning it with gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Although the immediate purpose of the Holy Fast is to make us worthy to receive divine grace and to prepare us for the feast of Pascha, its ultimate purpose is to make us fit for the Kingdom of heaven and prepare us for it. Of course, this is the ultimate purpose of every aspect of our pious Orthodox way of life, but Holy Lent especially intercedes for us in this behalf.

Nevertheless, I think all of us have experienced a strange contradiction within ourselves in this regards as we keep the Fast. We know that we are supposed to be struggling for the eternal Kingdom, but this seems to be something unclear and almost unreal. We believe in this Kingdom, yet it seems very far away.

When our Lord Jesus Christ was speaking with the Samaritan woman by the well, He told her that He would give that pure water which quenches spiritual thirst and springs *up into everlasting life*.<sup>1</sup> (John 4:14). This is the water of divine grace, which after our death transmutes itself into life everlasting in the Kingdom of Christ. The problem is, we are used to drinking not this water, but the foul, murky waters of the pleasures of the present life. For the grace of God to become active within us, for it to reveal the promise of the Kingdom, we must stop trying to slake our thirst with the polluted waters of worldly pleasures, whatever that may mean for us as individuals.

During Great Lent, we deprive ourselves of these vain pleasures, starting with rich, enjoyable foods containing meat and dairy products, but not ending with this. As recently as a generation or two ago, devout Orthodox Christians commonly curtailed every form of entertainment during Lent. No secular books or magazines were read, and the piano fell silent. But what is the situation now? Go into people's houses, even the homes of those fasting from meat and milk, and everything else will seem the same as usual. The radio will be playing, the television will be blaring, and young and old will still be wasting time on the computer. If anyone still remembers how to read, he will read whatever pleases him, and perhaps not even pick up a soul-saving book during Lent. The whole family will be drinking their fill of the water that never sprang up in anyone *into everlasting life*.

We have become so accustomed to such things, so dependent on them -- and the situation only gets worse year by year -- that it now seems almost inconceivable that we could give them up during Lent, even for the sake of the water which springs *up into everlasting life*. But just try, Christians, to do so, and see what a difference it can make! Deny yourself -- this is what holy Lent is all about. Deny yourself as much as you can, always repenting for your failings, always beseeching God's help, and your immortal, heavenly spirit -- chained to the passionate flesh by the vain things of this world -- will awaken to the summons of its heavenly homeland. It will catch a glimpse of the incomparable, ineffable beauty of the celestial homeland, and recall the splendor of paradise.

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To the degree that we repent from the depths of our hearts and deprive ourselves of worldly pleasures during Great Lent, we will enjoy gracious visitations of the Holy Spirit that stir up in us ardent yearning for the eternal Kingdom.

The very day before the fast starts we serve the Vespers of Forgiveness. Let us all begin the course of the fast with a good conscience, repenting of our faults, putting aside unworthy feelings, and forgiving one another our offences. For my part I ask forgiveness of all, and I bestow forgiveness on all.

May the Lord forgive each and every one of us our sins.

I pray that you all have a soul-profitting Great Lent.

In Christ,

+Demetrius of America