

## LENTEN MESSAGE FROM THE METROPOLITAN

Beloved Children of the Lord,

Having gone to Greece and attended the blessed celebrations of Theophany, we took part in the meeting of the Holy Synod of the Genuine Orthodox Church of Greece. At that time, I discussed with the Synod the issue of the consecration of a Bishop for our Church in North and South America. My proposal was accepted by all the Hierarchs. I call on all Orthodox Christians to pray fervently, especially during this season of repentance, Great Lent, for the Holy Church, for the Metropolis, for our parishes, for our Monasteries, and for all our institutions.

As Christians, we always have this understanding of togetherness, of unity, even though our parishes are far apart geographically. We know that we are united in Christ, One Metropolis in North and South America, as well as One Church worldwide, "One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church..." It is necessary for each one of us to stand before God in fervent prayer and beseech Him to cover the Church and protect Her from enemies, both visible and invisible. We need to pray that the Lord will give strength to all the presbyters and clergy of the Church, who are on the front lines, particularly in the difficult times which are awaiting us. There is a real, full-fledged battle raging against the Church. The prince of this world has always been the devil, but the devil is gaining more and more control on earth as time passes, and we draw closer to the end of the world. As I have always said, it is a demon infested world, but the infestation is now at a very dangerous level. It is very difficult not to get affected. We should always pray that the Christians remain faithful during this time, for without Christ, it would be impossible for us to make it through, unscathed.

This holy and blessed time of year, Great Lent, is the perfect time to stand before our Creator in fervent prayer. Great Lent is a period when we may have a little more boldness before God, because we are trying to concentrate a little. Let us take this seriously, beloved faithful. We should come before the Lord and beseech Him for our families, for our children, and for all Orthodox children. The children of the Church are going to be faced with many challenges; likely, worse challenges than the ones with which we were faced. The need for prayer is immediate, as prayer calls down God's mercy on His people. It is also the duty of all the children of our Sacred Metropolis to make special prayers during this holy season that our Lord will cover our Metropolis, that He will guide us in all things, according to His holy will, and that He would send forth worthy ministers to His holy Church.

As we said, we should increase our effort at prayer during Great Lent. Great Lent has a two-fold role in the life of every Orthodox Christian. Firstly, it is a preparation period for the Feast of feasts, Holy Pascha. In the Church, there has always been the very important practice of preparation for that which is holy. Moses fasted for forty days before receiving the Tablets of the Law. Our Lord fasted for forty days after His holy baptism, as an example for us. Prophet Elias fasted; all the Holy Prophets fasted in order to receive the grace of God. They prepared themselves. Preparation is key. Preparation for Holy Pascha is so important, that there is actually a preparatory period before the preparation of Great Lent: we call this the "Triodion," the three weeks before Clean Monday, beginning with the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee—and this is no coincidence. In Her wisdom, the Church shows us, in the actions of the Publican, the first thing that is needed as we begin this time of preparation: to humble ourselves and fall prostrate before God in repentance, begging His mercy for our sins.

This brings us to the second part of the role of Great Lent in the life of the Christian, which is closely linked to the first: Repentance. During the Triodion, we chant, "Do Thou Open unto me the portals of repentance, O Life Giver..." In order to repent properly we certainly need God's grace because repentance does not just come on spontaneously. We need to move all the filth and darkness away from our soul, so that we can see clearly enough to see ourselves, and this is not possible without God. The filth and darkness are our sins and passions. When a person starts to truly see himself, then he sees more of the details of his soul. We need to see ourselves clearly enough to feel pain over our spiritual state. Anyone who does not feel pain over his or her spiritual state, will not have true or meaningful repentance. We chant the hymn, "Thy Bridal Chamber, O my Savior, do I behold... and a garment I have not... Illumine the garment of my soul, O Light Bestower..." We have a garment—the garment of baptism—and just like any garment, it needs to be washed. If you do not wash it, the stains will keep growing and multiplying until it becomes filthy. Therefore, we need a continuous wash, so to speak, and that wash is repentance. Rightly does St. Symeon the New Theologian say that repentance is "the second baptism," out of which we emerge cleansed once again. With the gift of repentance, sinners can become more pure than the "pure."

Therefore, Great Lent is a period when we repent, and from that repentance, comes purification. With purification, we can then see the Resurrection in a manner worthy of Orthodox Christians. This is why, in the very first hymn of the Canon of Pascha, we chant, "Let us purify our senses and we shall behold Christ..." Purification comes from repentance—from mourning over one's sins. The more we are purified, the more we see Him, and Paschal joy abounds in our souls. Therefore we see that this pain over our sins leads to unutterable joy: mourning leads to repentance, which leads to purification, which leads to beholding the Resurrected Christ! And there is the Church, helping Her children along the path of Lent with Her instructive hymnology,

written by the Saints, over the centuries. The hymns during Great Lent, especially on Monday through Friday, are penitential hymns, that are always trying to bring the mind to some sort of contrition, and the heart to some sort of pain over our sins. It would be a blessing if most of the parishes could actually have daily services during Great Lent, so that the faithful could hear these hymns. We have the blessing, in the Monastery, to hear all these hymns. It is my fervent desire that the parishes also have as many services as possible during this period.

During Great Lent, the services are longer; indeed, there should be more prayer, and there should be stricter fasting. Fasting is an aid in repentance. We are asked to "Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance." (Matt 3:8) Fasting is one of the fruits of repentance. Almsgiving is another one of these fruits; the Lord calls upon the faithful to give alms and to support His churches, His monasteries, and the poor. Other fruits of repentance are prayer, vigils, patience, longsuffering, and all good things which help us to attain God's grace.

God commanded His people to "tithe" in the Old Testament—that is, to give away one-tenth of their wealth or income to alms. This one-tenth was called a "tithe." Many Orthodox Christians choose to continue this God-pleasing practice, which always brings great blessings upon the giver, as the Lord has promised. St. Dorotheos of Gaza teaches of another kind of "tithe"—one of 10% of each Christian's year. St. Dorotheos calls Great Lent itself a "tithe," and teaches that the duration of Great Lent is exactly one-tenth of the calendar year. In his writings, he explains that the number of days in Great Lent, from Clean Monday to the Friday before the Saturday of Lazarus (the end of Lent, since Holy Week is technically a separate fast) mathematically works out to be 1/10 of the entire year, and thus should be given as a tithe to God. Beloved faithful, this is a healthy way to think of Great Lent: it is God's. Let us give to God what is His: this season of Lent, to the extent possible.

Let us be conscientious. Let us struggle more during Great Lent. This is a great opportunity, and a wondrous time of spiritual rejuvenation and focus on the eternal, rather than on the earthly concerns all around us, which are ultimately meaningless—they are temporary and will quickly pass away. Let us try to draw closer to Him, Who created us and loves us beyond comprehension. Let us try to struggle more, to give up more. The faithful should limit access to television or the internet, and use technology only for important necessities during Great Lent. The more you give up, the more you gain. The more sacrifices we make, the more we will receive God's grace. How do we Christians express love? Through sacrifice. Let us show our Lord that we love Him, the Godman, Who stretched out His arms on the Tree for us.

The Gospel that we read during Agapi Vespers, on Pascha, refers to the "eighth day," meaning Pascha plus seven days, which is Thomas Sunday. There is another significance to this. The Holy Fathers refer to the "eighth age"—the world's creation was accomplished in seven days, and the eighth age is the "age to come." The separation between body and soul that occurs at our repose is not natural; it is a component of our fallen nature, a result of sin. At the Second Coming of the Lord, that is, when the eighth age comes, then our souls and bodies will be reunited at the Resurrection. On Pascha, the doors of Paradise are opened, and in part, we can have a "preview of coming attractions" so to speak. In other words, through our Savior's Resurrection and the joy of Pascha, we can glimpse, in part, that blessed eighth age.

Every Orthodox Christian begins Great Lent with forgiveness. As your Metropolitan, I want to take this opportunity to ask forgiveness from everyone, and I pray that our Lord bestow forgiveness on everyone. Whatever good has been done in our Metropolis is the work of our merciful Lord; whatever mistakes have been made are because of our frailty. I pray that you all have a soul-profitting Great Lent. And please remember, dear faithful, to let go of the things that you need to let go of: do not hold on to grudges or anger because we must utter with a clear conscience "...Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." We are all debtors to the Lord. Therefore, let us make a new beginning in paying off our "debt" with this season, our "tithe" of Great Lent.

Your fervent intercessor before Christ,  
+ Demetrius of America