

Great Lent and Holy Week

Renewal of Our Baptism Commitment

*Let us enter the season of the radiant Fast
with joy,
Giving ourselves to the spiritual combat.
Let us purify our spirit
and cleanse our flesh.
As we fast from food,
let us abstain from every passion.
Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit,
may we persevere with love
so as to be worthy to see
the solemn Passion of Christ our God,
and with spiritual gladness
to behold His holy Resurrection.
(Forgiveness Vespers)*

In the early Church baptisms took place in connection with the glorious feast of Christ's Resurrection. The one to be baptized, the catechumen, was plunged into the baptismal pool, symbolic tomb of Christ, only to be raised with Christ from the tomb which now symbolized a womb to new life. Catechumens studied the Christian faith for one to three years, and the last forty days before their baptisms were given more intense instruction on how to live the life of Christ through prayer, fasting and good works, – the basis for a Christian life. So this season was not dismal or sad and gloomy but rather joyful – living Christ was filled with joy.

Over the hundreds of years, ***the Church extended this 40-day period even to us***, the already existing Christians, recognizing that we do not always live our Christ-life as best as we can. We slip: we forget to pray and converse with God as we should. We overindulge much in food and spend more time with gossip and back-biting. We ignore our brothers and sisters in need and forget to care for each other as we should. Our likeness to God gets tarnished and many times we fail to see it – we need a renewal, so the Church proposes to us a more active life in Great Lent to pray more, to fast more, and to perform more good works for 40 days with the hope we are able to renew good habits in our lives in imitation of Jesus Christ, our Lord, model and Savior.

Great Lent opens with Forgiveness Vespers at which we chant: “Let us observe a Fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil, to control the tongue, to forebear from anger, to abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then our fasting is true and pleasing to God.”

We welcome Great Lent not as a time for self-inflicted agony or self-improving therapy. We greet this season as a holy time consecrated to the correction, purification and enlightenment of ourselves through the fulfillment of the commandments of the crucified God.

We push out the evil within us and allow the fruits of the Holy Spirit to take deeper root in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (*Galatians 5:22*). The forty days are saving days for complete and total dedication to things of God. The forty days are our “tithe” or one tenth of the year to focus more on our godliness. We return to God in the abundance He gives us!

We begin Great Lent with Forgiveness Vespers, properly on Sunday evening or in some parishes on Monday – the first day of Lent. We ask each other for forgiveness as we embark on this intense spiritual journey. God desires our repentance, not our remorse. We express sorrow for our sins but do so in the joy of God’s mercy. We make ready for the Resurrection, both Christ’s and our own. We renew our baptismal promises.

The Church offers us the tools for renewing ourselves and our attempts to be more in conformity with the teachings of Christ. The basic tools are ***Prayer, Fasting, and Good works*** – these are essential elements to living a full Christian life. By focusing on them more intensely we begin to renew ourselves to live better lives.

Prayer – Prayer is necessary in Christian life. Jesus Christ himself prayed and taught us how to pray. To be a follower of Christ we must pray – our conversation with God. We lift our minds and hearts to God to have communion with him in order to accomplish his will.

We have ***personal prayer*** at home using some formal words or just being informal in dialogue with God. We are urged to pray regularly, secretly, briefly and without many words, trusting that God hears us. “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites... so they may be seen by others... rather go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (*MT 6:5-6*).

A simple prayer for this purpose is the Jesus Prayer: ***“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”*** This can be repeated many times. We invoke the name of God to have communion with him.

Another prayer prayed especially at every liturgical Lenten service is the ***Prayer of St. Ephrem***. Each short paragraph is accompanied with a great prostration. This prayer can be said upon waking, with our family meals, and before sleeping – or any other times during the day:

✠ **O Lord and Master of my life, grant that I may not be afflicted with a spirit of sloth, inquisitiveness, ambition and vain talking.**

✠ **Instead, bestow upon me, Your servant, a spirit of purity, humility, patience and love.**

✠ **Yes, O Lord and King, grant me the grace to see my own sins and not to judge my brethren., for You are blessed forever and ever. Amen.**

During Great Lent the Church offers us public services: **Presanctified Liturgy, Great Compline and the Akathist Hymn**. We do not go to church to say our private prayers, but we bring ourselves, our cares, desires, troubles, questions and joy and unite them with others to the prayer of the Church, to the prayer of Christ, the Mother of God, the saints, and our brothers and sisters in our particular community. Check your parish bulletins for these enriching community events.

Fasting – Fasting is essential to our Christian life. Christ fasted and taught us to fast. The goal of fasting is to purify our lives, a physical and spiritual liberation from sin. We strengthen ourselves to love God and people. What money we save from fasting on specific foods is shared with others who have a need. We have our Eparchial **Shepherd's Care Program**: Each person, old and young, banks the savings in a Lenten mite box and presents it on Pascha to the Church so that the Shepherd, the Bishop, distributes it to the poor and needy. Fasting helps our body and the bodies of others.

Our fasting regulations developed in monasteries and are somewhat mitigated today but it is up to each person individually to adjust the fast to their life and circumstances. Check your parish bulletin for the traditional fast and the mitigated guidelines and make it a better part of your life – the rules are ideals to which we strive.

Jesus reminds us in Mathew's Gospel: "When you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting... But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (MT 6:16-18).

St. John Chrysostom also gives us important words on fasting: "Real fasting is not merely abstinence from meats, but from sins as well. Let the hands fast by being pure from plundering and avarice. Let the feet fast by ceasing to run to unlawful spectacles... Let the mouth fast from disgraceful speech, for what does it profit us if we abstain from fish and fowl and yet bite and devour our brothers and sisters."

Our Lenten Vespers sums this up perfectly: "Let us observe a Fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil, to control the tongue, to forebear from anger, to abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then our fasting is true and pleasing to God." (1st Monday of Lent).

Good Works – Almsgiving – The third arm of Great Lent is a stronger refocus on doing good works. Almsgiving is a daily event, not just done in Lent. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus not only speaks about prayer and fasting, he adds his words or commands of almsgiving as well. "So when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do... rather do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (MT 6:2-4).

Jesus' call for us to do good works even confirms God's law in the old covenant: "Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor... Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor Him." (*Proverbs 14:21, 31*).

Scripture teaches us that to share our possessions to support the needs of others is the most concrete expression of faith and love. Faith is not alive in one who does not help the needy. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead". (*James 2:14-17*).

The Fathers of the Church also insist on almsgiving. **St. John Chrysostom** says: "Feed the needy now or be ready forever to feed the fires of hell!" **St. Basil the Great** also insists on sharing with others: "The grain in your barn belongs to the hungry. The coat in your closet belongs to the naked. The shoes rotting in your basement belong to the barefoot. The silver (*money*) hidden in boxes belongs to the needy. You sin against all those whom you are able to help, but fail to do so."

Our liturgical texts also focus on good works: "In this season of repentance, let us stretch out our hands in works of mercy. Then the ascetic struggles of the Fast will bring us eternal life, for nothing saves the soul so much as generosity to those in need; and almsgiving combined with fasting will deliver us from death. Let us do all this with gladness, for there is no better way, and it will bring salvation to our souls." (*Matins Aposticha, 2nd Thursday of Lent*).

Just prior to the Great Fast we recall on Meatfare Sunday the great parable in Matthew's Gospel of the **Last Judgement**: Jesus reminds those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, visited and cared for the sick, and visited those in prison, "just as you did it to one of the least of those of my brethren, you did it to me...and those that ignored the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick and in prison, "just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do to me." (*MT 25:31-46*). **Jesus identifies himself as every person in need**. Our brothers and sisters are our life – we cannot ignore them or pass by their needs.

Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. On weekdays of the Great Lent, we fast from the full Eucharistic Divine Liturgy. However, it is not fasting from receiving Communion, just from the full joyful Divine Liturgy. The Church does not deprive us from receiving Holy Communion by celebrating a modified Vesper-Liturgy in which we receive the body and blood of Christ consecrated on the previous Sunday.

Generally, in our Melkite Church it is celebrated on Wednesday evening but it can be any weekday evening according to parish schedules. It is truly a beautiful service with the pre-sanctified gifts brought to the Holy Altar in deep silence.

Akathist Hymn – This beautiful Kontakion written by St. Romanos, the author of many long hymns is connected with the Great Feast of Annunciation on March 25, which generally occurs during Great Lent, or Holy Week. In our Melkite Church, on Friday evenings we chant the Odes to the Mother of God and a section of the Akathist Hymn. On the 5th Friday we chant it entirely at night prayer (*Compline*). Although not directly connected to Lenten services, this expressive theological hymn honors the Mother of God who bore Jesus Christ in her womb. She gave birth to our Savior whose saving actions we will celebrate in Holy Week leading to his glorious Resurrection.

Special commemorations take place on the Saturdays and Sundays of this fasting season and a very long **Canon on Repentance** written by St. Andrew of Crete is sometimes chanted in some parishes. Check with your parish priest, and if not chanted in the church request this Canon which you can chant or read in your homes.

Great Lent ends with the **resurrection of Lazarus** on the day before Palm Sunday. However, although the 40 days are complete, we embark on a more intense and expressive week – the **Holy and Great Week of the Passion of Christ**. During Holy Week our fasting should be a bit more intense. Although we are still somewhat in partial lockdown with COVID-19, most services will be live streamed by our parishes. It is a beautiful week walking with Christ in his passion, proclaiming Him our King on Palm Sunday and Bridegroom of the Church. We are anointed with the oil of the sick since we are all spiritually infirm. We witness his humility by washing his apostles' feet as a reminder that all of us are called to serve each other. We celebrate his institution of the Eucharist which is our life-giving food. We read the Passion Gospels and enact his crucifixion, meditating on his long-suffering and death on the cross, accomplished for our salvation. We remove the dead Christ from the Cross, prepare the burial and sing the joyful glorifications at His decorated tomb. We process with his burial shroud (*epitaphios*) around the church and even in some places outside of the church, and upon reentering the church we bow underneath his body as a sign of dying with him and asking to be raised with him too!

On **Holy Saturday** we bless the new light – the sign that Christ lives and we proclaim his resurrection to the world outside before our Paschal Divine Liturgy. And as we proclaim his resurrection, we too stand upright and proclaim our own renewal of our Christian life which we received at the time of our baptisms. At our baptisms we were asked if we renounce all evil, if we accept Christ and if we will live the Christ life. If we were babies at that time our godparents answered for us. **But now as adults we recommit ourselves to living Christ and to being another Christ in our world.**

I pray this Holy Season be filled with joy for all of you and I pray that when you shout the first **Christ is risen**, you can add **“and me too,”** I'm a renewed follower of Jesus Christ.

A Short Pastoral Letter on Great Lent and Holy Week - 2021
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