



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
DIOCESE OF NEW YORK & NEW JERSEY

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Archpastoral Letter for the Great Fast 2019

Protocol Number 01-001/2019
Sunday of Forgiveness, March 10, 2019

Dearly Beloved of Our Diocesan Family:
Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!

*What is the Church, if not a place where the sick meet their physician?
Those sick from sin come to confess their sickness to God the Physician,
and to find medicine and healing from Him who is the true Healer from
all human suffering and weakness, and the Giver of all good things.*

-- St. Nikolai (Velimirovich) of Zhicha

At sundown on Forgiveness Sunday, we Orthodox Christians begin our annual observance of Great Lent. This is a season provided by the Church **as a time of our healing**. As unbelievable as it may seem, we are commanded by Our Savior to “be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) ... and the Lord would not command us to do something that is impossible. Of course, it is not possible for us to become perfect on our own efforts; but with the power of the Holy Spirit, becoming like God (theosis) can be achieved.

When God created the heavens and the earth, He pronounced everything that He had made as good. Unfortunately, not only the human race but all of creation was damaged when Adam and Eve sinned. In every generation, the sins of that generation added to the damage. As time went on, things became even worse through man’s rejection of God, whether out of neglect or by outright rebellion.

Fortunately, God is not content to see His good creation forever ruined. From the beginning of time, He had a plan for the healing of the human race ... and with that healing, the healing of all of His creation. For this purpose, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, took flesh and lived among us. He came to begin the process of that healing, and to establish His Church for the continuation of that healing.

Individually, we enter that process at baptism. And although we are made sinless immediately by baptism, we are not made perfect. The perfection that God wants for us is a long process, a process requiring much effort on our part ... as we use the many tools that God gives us ... and as we utilize His help. The tools given us for this process are: prayer and fasting, attending the divine services and reading the Holy Scriptures, the Mysteries of Confession and Holy Communion, and our attention to good deeds on behalf of our fellow man.

During the Great Fast, we are given the opportunity to increase the use of these tools provided for us for our continued healing. We are instructed to pray and fast more than we would usually do during the rest of the year. We are all encouraged to make our personal confession during this season in preparation for Holy Pascha. We have the extra opportunity for Holy Communion at the Pre-Sanctified Liturgies. And we are commanded by the Gospel to look for opportunities to serve “the least of the brethren” ... to take the money that we save from sumptuous meals and entertainment and to share with those in need. Thus, the regular practices of other times of the year are increased in this season, so that we have an accelerated health treatment plan for our souls during Great Lent. If we see Lent as a time for healing, it is like going to a wellness center or health spa for two months.

Truly, the Church is the hospital of our souls ... but healing can only come if we put effort into it. If our doctor prescribes a medication for our condition and we fail to follow the doctor’s orders, we will not get well. The Church has all that we need for our spiritual transformation, but healing only comes if we cooperate with the healing process. The goal is holiness – wholeness – and it is the direct result of our having submitted in all humility to a life of repentance. When we do this, Our Lord changes us. But if we simply go through the motions of our traditions, we are no better off than the Pharisees whom Christ criticized.

Let us heed the words of Saint John Chrysostom, the most eloquent of all preachers, who reminds us:

The Church is a hospital, and not a courtroom, for souls. She does not condemn on behalf of sins, but grants remission of sins. Nothing is so joyous in our life as the thanksgiving that we experience in the Church. In the Church, the joyful sustain their joy. In the Church, those worried acquire merriment; and those saddened, joy. In the Church, the troubled find relief, and the heavy-laden, rest. "Come," says the Lord, "all of you who labor and are heavy-laden (with trials and sins), and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

What could be more desirable than to meet this voice? What is sweeter than this invitation? The Lord is calling you to the Church for a rich banquet. He transfers you from struggles to rest, and from tortures to relief. He relieves you from the burden of your sins. He heals worries with thanksgiving, and sadness with joy.

No one is truly free or joyful besides he who lives for Christ. Such a person overcomes all evil and does not fear anything!

I wish all of you a blessed Lent ... a time of true healing at the hands of the Divine Physician ... the Lord Who loves us more than we love ourselves. To Him be all glory, honor and worship, with His Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing, and my sincere love,

+ Michael

Archbishop of New York and the
Diocese of New York and New Jersey