



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
DIOCESE OF NEW YORK & NEW JERSEY

33 Hewitt Avenue - Bronxville, NY 10708
Office (914) 779-6580 Fax (914) 779-6581
www.nynjoca.org

Archpastoral Letter for the Nativity Fast 2020

Prot. No. 01-009/2020
First Day of "St. Philip's Fast"
The Nativity Fast ~ Advent
Sunday, November 15, 2020

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

Prepare, O Bethlehem, for Eden has been opened to all. Adorn yourself, O Ephratha, for the Tree of Life blossoms forth from the Virgin in the cave. Her womb is a spiritual paradise planted with the fruit divine; if we eat of it we shall live forever and not die like Adam. Christ is coming to restore the image which He made in the beginning. (Troparion of the Forefeast)

There are exactly forty days remaining before the celebration of the Birth of Our Lord. A good question for each of us to ask is, How are we preparing for Christmas? For many in the world, there will be the hustle and bustle of decorating homes and trees, shopping for presents, and planning a feast of foods and drink. For others, it is a time that has lost its meaning: no Christmas pageants in schools, no television specials with Hollywood stars honoring the Savior's birth, no singing of carols and no reminder of the Baby born in Bethlehem.

The question remains, How are **you** preparing for the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord? Our Orthodox Church, of course, provides us with guidelines for this preparation: a forty-day fasting period ... one of four seasons of the year during which we are called upon to intensify our spiritual lives through prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Another fast, you say? And another long one! Not really, when we realize that this forty-day fast symbolizes the preparation of the people of the Old Covenant for the coming of the Messiah! Saint Matthew tells us that it was 42 generations of waiting from the time of the Hebrews' first father of faith, Abraham, to the Birth of Christ (not mentioning all the generations before Abraham, going all the way back to Adam). It was indeed a long, but spotted history – a history of God's steadfast love and care for His people, and their frequent unfaithfulness and apostasy in response.

We know that the One Whom they awaited has indeed already come – in the Person of the Son of God become flesh, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior! He tells us of the blessing that we have as His Chosen People: *“Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it”* (Matthew 13:16-17). The challenge for us is to be faithful to Him anew at His Coming – not like so many of the Old Covenant who had “no room for Him” at His Nativity ... and who later, forgetting all His miracles on their behalf, clamored for His Crucifixion.

As your bishop, to help you plan your personal spiritual preparations for the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, I offer you the following guidelines from which to work ... as you seek to be worthy sons and daughters of the God Who *“so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

1) Every day of the Nativity Fast, be sure to fulfill your Prayer Rule before your Icon Corner ... pray alone, one to one, before the Icon of Our Lord ... or with your spouse ... or with your whole family. (I have attached to this letter a copy of the Family Prayer Rule, published by the Diocese). While the pandemic may limit our attendance in the church building, nothing should keep us from praying every day, multiple times each day, to Our Lord in the privacy of our Icon Corner in our home, which should become “a little church,” in the words of Saint John Chrysostom.

2) Each day of the Fast, either by yourself or with your family, read one chapter of one of the four Gospels. In a world so confused and afraid, nothing is more soothing and encouraging than the Word of God. The Bible is a “love letter to you from the King of Heaven,” according to Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk. In it we find God’s guidance as to how to live – and in it, too, we find forgiveness when we fall.

3) Make every effort to attend as faithfully as you can the Divine Services of the Church – Divine Liturgy on Sundays and feasts days, Vespers, Akathists and other services offered throughout the Nativity Fast ... but especially the Vigil Service of the Eve of the Nativity and the Liturgy of the Feast of the Nativity, on Christmas Day. I realize that the pandemic has limited the number of attendees at services, so you may not be able to attend every one. But make every effort to attend as many as you can – there should be no empty spots that could be filled because we were not there. And no one should make “the opening of presents” a priority over the “celebration of Christ’s Birth in the church.”

4) If your health or your age, your fear, or the numbers dictated by the pandemic prevent you from attending the Liturgy or other services in person, then pray at your Icon Corner the Reader’s Vespers and the Typika Service published each week on the Diocesan website (for reading online or printing out). Such a time of family prayer together at your Icon Corner will truly make your home “a little church.”

5) If you are unable to offer the Reader's Vespers or the Typika Service, then try to follow divine services live-streamed over the internet from one of our diocesan churches. But remember, you are praying these services together with the parish that is live-streaming. Make sure that you are dressed in your church clothes, standing in prayer as if you were in church, singing or praying along with the celebrant and the choir ... offering worship to the Lord from your heart.

6) Be sure during this forty-day Nativity Fast, to follow the fasting guidelines of the Church as best you can – faithfully and honestly abstaining from meat and dairy products at a level that you are able to maintain. As in Great Lent, fasting is designed for us to take control of our desire for food and drink, so that we can take greater control of other passions that lead to sin (pride, anger, greed, lust, etc.) When you abstain from food you like, be sure to remember the poor and pray for those who have little or nothing, that God will provide for them as He has for you.

7) The Saints tell us that with the money that we save by abstaining from rich foods during fasting seasons, we should use those funds to help the poor and those in need. The real Christian goes out looking for the Lazarus whom the rich man ignored ... and helps him. Whether you make a donation to a food bank or soup kitchen; provide food for a hungry person on the street; help a neighbor who cannot drive or shovel their snow; visit or call someone who is elderly, sick or home-bound ... remember Our Lord's own words, *"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me"* (Matthew 25:40).

8) In the Gospel that is read on the Feast of the Nativity, we will hear of the Magi presenting to the new-born Christ-Child their rich offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Make sure you remember to give the Infant Savior a generous offering for His Church, to continue His work in your parish. Especially amidst this pandemic, the support of your parish church is so vital to its mission. As I said early on in this crisis: Even though we might not be able to be present in person to love our church, we are going to support it so that the Church is still there for us to love when this crisis abates.

9) During this Nativity Fast, it is essential for us, in order to truly prepare for the Feast of Our Lord's Birth, to make a good confession of our sins before our spiritual father. This past Lent we were overwhelmed by the unexpected attack of the pandemic, which kept us from our churches during the Great Fast, Holy Week and Pascha. And, we were given dispensation from confession for a time. But now, we have many opportunities to make our confession before the Nativity – in person in the church, over the telephone, by appointment. Let us not allow the pandemic or the circumstances surrounding it, to deprive us of the Mystery of Repentance, that brings us home to our Heavenly Father ... and through it, the assurance of the absolution of our confessed sins by the saving Death of His Son, the shedding of Whose blood washes clean "our sins, [which] though they be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). Let us be sure to cleanse, by our repentance and confession, the "chalice of our soul" to receive the Precious Body and Blood of the new-born Savior on the Feast of His Birth.

10) And finally, of course, let us make every effort, whether during the Divine Liturgy of the Nativity – or, if necessary, by appointment after its celebration – to unite ourselves in the Mystery of Holy Communion to the Son of God born of the Virgin, on the Feast of His Nativity. There is no greater way of celebrating this Feast than **Communion** with our Lord and Savior. He tells us: ***“He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood abides in Me, and I in him”...“He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day”*** (John 6:54,56).

Yes, we can criticize those who have commercialized the Nativity. And we can lament those who have tried to literally take Christ out of Christmas. But it is we who must preserve the true meaning of the Feast and keep the traditions of our Faith. The Scripture enjoins us Orthodox Christians “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Ephesians 4:1).

There is no better way to begin anew than today, the first day of the Nativity Fast – to commit this sacred season of the year to only one focus: **the One Who loves us more than we love ourselves, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**

With my humble prayers, archpastoral blessings and sincere love,

+ Archbishop Michael

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

GUIDELINES FOR A FAMILY PRAYER RULE

(Taken from *Acquiring the Mind of Christ*,
by Archimandrite Sergius (Bowyer),
Abbot of St. Tikhon's Monastery, South Canaan, PA)

- A Prayer Rule must not and cannot be said in the car. It is certainly good to pray when traveling, but the daily Prayer Rule must be done in front of the icons and the Gospel, preferably with a lit candle, and if possible, the room lights dimmed. It is important to remember that we will never have time for God, but rather must *make* time for God, for the “*Kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force*” (Matt. 11:12). The best time to pray is in the morning or in the evening when it is darker.
- Also, when using a Rule of Prayer, we must be flexible and do what we can do attentively and consistently. Our goal is to maintain the connection with God and cultivate a real relationship, not just fulfill our “rule” of prayer.
- The tempo of saying the Jesus Prayer can vary; if we are distracted, then we pray quickly; if we are relaxed, slowly.
- The Jesus Prayer is not a mantra or vain repetition. The words are a profoundly meaningful confession by which we begin our dialogue with God in fulfillment of the Lord's words: “*Whatever you ask in My Name, that I will do*” (John 14:13).
- We need to read the words of our Lord every day, at least one chapter. A consecutive reading of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John throughout the year greatly aids us in understanding and doing God's will.

A FAMILY PRAYER RULE

The Trisagion Prayers

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Thee, O God, glory to Thee.

O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere and fillest all things; Treasury of blessings and Giver of Life: Come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.

Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us. (*three times*)

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

O Most Holy Trinity, have mercy on us. O Lord, cleanse us from our sins. O Master, pardon our iniquities. O Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities for Thy name's sake.

Lord, have mercy. (*three times*)

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Lord, have mercy. (*three times*)

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Come let us worship God our King. Come let us worship and fall down before Christ our King and God. Come let us worship and fall down before Christ Himself, our King and our God.

- *Psalm 50 (if desired)*

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy; and according to the multitude of Thy compassions blot out my transgression. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know mine iniquity, and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee only have I sinned and done this evil before Thee, that Thou mightest be justified in Thy words, and prevail when Thou art judged. For behold, I was conceived in iniquities, and in sins did my mother bear me. For behold, Thou hast loved truth; the hidden and secret things of Thy wisdom hast Thou made manifest unto me. Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be made clean; Thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow. Thou shalt make me to hear joy and gladness; the bones that be humbled, they shall rejoice. Turn Thy face away from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and with Thy governing Spirit establish me. I shall teach transgressors Thy ways, and the ungodly shall turn back unto Thee. Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation; my tongue shall rejoice in Thy righteousness, O Lord, Thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Thy praise. For if Thou hadst desired sacrifice, I would have given it; with whole-burnt offerings Thou shalt not be pleased. A sacrifice unto God is a broken spirit; a heart that is broken and humbled God will not despise. Do good, O Lord, in Thy good pleasure unto Sion, and let the walls of Jerusalem be builded. Then shalt Thou be pleased with a sacrifice of righteousness, with oblation and whole-burnt offerings. Then shall they offer bullocks upon Thine altar.

- *The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things, visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages. Light of Light, True God of True God, begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father, by Whom all things were made; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man. And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and on the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets. In One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

- ***The Jesus Prayer***

(Then 5 or 10 prostrations [or bows, if we are not able], saying the Jesus Prayer:)

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.

(We pray for ourselves, for our loved ones, or for those with whom we have ill will. We cross ourselves each time and say the prayer slowly as we bow to the ground).

- ***Prayers for our Family and Loved Ones***

Grant rest eternal in blessed repose, O Lord, to the souls of Thy departed servants, the ever-to-be-remembered (*their names*), and make their memory to be eternal! Memory eternal! (*three times*)

O Physician of souls and bodies, with a contrite and humble heart, we ask Thee to bring to an end the physical and spiritual pain and suffering of Thy servants (*their names*), and as Thou did raise up the daughter of Jairus and Peter's mother-in-law by Thy divine touch, raise up Thy servants unto renewed strength and good health, and grant them many, blessed years! Many Years! (*three times*)

- ***Prayers from our Prayer Book***

(Here we can say prayers from the Prayer Book, especially Prayers in Preparation for Holy Communion, Prayers of Intercession for Others or Special Intention, etc.)

- ***A Chapter from the Scriptures***

(Then we read a chapter from the Gospel, or another book of the Bible, perhaps according to the Church calendar, or also a portion of Orthodox spiritual reading.)

- ***Morning Prayer (if desired)***

I thank Thee, O Lord, that Thou hast again shown me the Light of a new day. Grant me to greet this day in peace. At all times, help me to rely upon Thy holy will. In every hour of this day, help me, teach me, and reveal Thy will to me. Bless, help, and save all those who surround me. Teach me to treat everything that comes to me throughout this day with peace of soul and with firm conviction that Thy will governs all things. In all my deeds and words, sanctify, bless and correct my thoughts and feelings. In unforeseen events, let me not forget that everything is sent by Thee. Teach me to act firmly and wisely without embittering or embarrassing others. O Lord, give me strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day with all it shall bring. Direct my will, teach me to pray, and Thyself, come, grant me Thy blessing, be with me, and pray within me. Amen.

- ***Evening Prayer (if desired)***

O Eternal God and King of all creation, Who hast kept me safe to attain to this hour, forgive me all wherein I have sinned today in deed, word, and thought. Cleanse, O Lord, my transgressions and faults and make me a Temple for Thy Holy Spirit. Vanquish the enemies, both bodily and bodiless, that fight against me, and keep and deliver me from the vain thoughts and evil desires which tempt me. Receive my prayers in Thy great mercy. Shine into my heart the Light of the Holy Spirit. Grant me to live according to Thy commandments. Teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. O Lord, I thank Thee for all the things that Thou hast brought me this day and I commend it all into Thy hands, trusting that through Thy mercy all things will turn out for the good and for my salvation. Grant me also, as I go to sleep, rest for my body and soul, and preserve me from the passions of the flesh and the dark evil spirits. Amen.

- ***Rite of Forgiveness***

(Each member of the family lines up from the eldest to the youngest, and coming before each person, asks forgiveness of one another, offering the Kiss of Peace:)

Forgive me, a sinner. *(The other person responds:)* God forgives, and I forgive.

(You might also want to say to each other:) God loves you ... and I love you.

- ***Concluding Prayers (if desired)***

It is truly meet to bless thee, O Theotokos, ever-blessed and most pure and the Mother of our God. More honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim; without corruption thou gavest birth to God the Word: True Theotokos, we magnify thee!

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen. Lord, have mercy. *(three times)*

Through the prayers of our holy Fathers, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy upon us and save us. Amen.

Through the prayers of Thy most pure Mother, my holy Guardian Angel, my patron saint *(name)*, and of all Thy Saints, have mercy on us and upon Thy world.

O Lord, into Thy hands I commit my spirit. Amen.

+