



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 Great Fast 2020

Protocol Number 01-001/2020
Sunday of Forgiveness, March 1, 2020

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

*Let us begin the fast with joy!
Let us prepare ourselves for spiritual efforts!
Let us cleanse our soul and cleanse our flesh!
Let us abstain from every passion as we abstain from food!
Let us rejoice in the virtues of the Spirit and fulfill them in love,
that we all may see the Passion of Christ our God,
and rejoice in spirit at the holy Pascha!*

– Stichera from the Vespers for the Beginning of Great Lent

The time has come again for the beginning of the Great Fast! As we see from the hymn above, for the Saints, Lent is a time of joy and rejoicing. For many of us, the seven-week fast is a time of struggle and hardship. The call to prayer and fasting, repentance and confession, Church services and Scripture readings, acts of charity and gifts of alms can actually challenge some to the point of burden and frustration – which is certainly not the purpose of this sacred season of our liturgical year.

We must remember that the practices and goals of Great Lent are not “ends” in themselves. We don’t pray for the sake of prayer, of fulfilling mechanically a rule of repetition. We don’t fast for the sake of fasting, to observe a requirement of giving up what we enjoy. All of the things the Church calls upon us to do during the Great Fast have one purpose – for us to have and to maintain a connection with God ... to cultivate a real relationship with Him ... and to come closer to Him, be more like Him, become one of His saints.

This Lent I would ask that each of us focus on two aspects of this holy season – Prayer and Fasting. These are the two basic components of Lent, and the formula which Christ prescribes for us in the Gospel: *“This kind (of evil) cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting”* (Mark 9:29).

A Family Prayer Rule

This Lent I urge that each of us renew or establish a daily Family Prayer Rule. If you live with your parents, pray with your parents (and siblings) once every day. If you are married, pray with your spouse. If you have children, include them. And if you live by yourself, ask your guardian angel or patron saint to pray with you. Being alone in the spiritual arena is very difficult; we need the strength of all those who share the Faith with us, as we struggle against the passions, our weaknesses, our doubts and our fears ... in order to have a meaningful prayer life.

A Family Prayer Rule need not be long or rigorous; actually it should be something flexible ... that works for us. In his book *Acquiring the Mind of Christ*, Archimandrite Sergius, the Abbot of our Saint Tikhon's Monastery, suggests a very doable guideline for daily prayer, one we can use as a family in our homes: First, the Trisagion Prayers (Glory to Thee ... O Heavenly King ... Holy God ... Most Holy Trinity ... Our Father ... Come, let us worship) which are found at the beginning of every prayer book. Second, Psalm 50, or 51 if you use a Western Bible (the perfect Prayer of Repentance: "Have mercy on me, O God..."). Next, the Nicene Creed (to daily renew our belief in the truths of our Faith). Then, the Jesus Prayer ("Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me") 5 or 10 times – with prostrations (or bows). Lastly, add petitions for members of the family, friends, neighbors, special needs, etc.

Father Sergius also suggests that we read a chapter of the Scripture each day, and I think for a family that this is so important – that we all, young and old alike, read from the "love letter that the King of Heaven has written to us," in the words of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk. You can follow the liturgical calendar for each day or begin with the first Gospel, and go chapter by chapter ... on to the second Gospel, and so on.

For adults, this is certainly doable. For your children, you may want to make it simpler: the Trisagion Prayers, the Jesus Prayer, and the personal prayer requests. But somewhere in each week, you should read the Bible stories to your children. I would add that every evening before going to bed, you also have a "mini" Rite of Forgiveness, asking each other, Forgive me, Mom ... forgive me, Dad ... etc., and close by saying, God forgives, and I forgive ... I love you, and God loves you.

This may take some time out of each evening ... but when you think about it, God gives each of us 168 hours of life each week. How much time do we give back to Him in prayer? If we attend Liturgy and Vespers each weekend, and spend half-an-hour of prayer each day, that adds up to not quite 4 percent of our week. Surely we can at least do this much.

Lent is the time, my beloved, to begin anew to re-build your and your family's relationship with the Lord through prayer ... a daily rule of prayer. And when the Great Fast is over, this family rule is one thing you don't stop doing; don't go back to the way it was ... go forward and Heavenward.

Fasting From More Than Food

For so many of us, fasting from meat and dairy products is a real effort, truly a struggle, even an ordeal. But the truth is that fasting from food is just the tip of the iceberg. Fasting by our stomach is just one aspect of Great Lent. All of our bodily members should join in abstaining from what is not of the Lord and for the Lord. The eyes, the ears, the mouth, the hands, the feet, the mind and the heart ... all have to work together in the Lenten season ... so that fasting is not an "end" in itself ... but something that connects us to the Lord Who fasted Himself for 40 days, to maintain in the wilderness of temptation His loving relationship with His Father.

So we might ask ourselves: How do my eyes fast? By not looking at images that are impure ... not watching too much television ... not spending too much time in front of the computer. Instead, our eyes should watch wholesome programs, read the Scriptures or the lives of the Saints. What about my ears? By not listening to gossip ... or to criticism of others ... or to complaining by others. Instead, listen to the Word of God, to sermons, to Church music. My mouth? By not speaking gossip or criticism or complaints ... or not using foul language or curse words – instead, praying more, singing the hymns of the Church, visiting with the elderly and sick and speaking words of love and reassurance.

How do my hands fast? By not doing things that are not good or honest or pure ... Instead, volunteering to do needed work in and for the church, my family, my neighbor. My feet? By not letting them take me to places where I might fall into sin ... instead, going to the services, the parish's activities, a pilgrimage to a monastery. My mind? By not thinking sinful thoughts, judgments about others, or unneeded criticism ... instead, thinking prayerful best wishes, thoughts of improvement, words of encouragement. My heart? By not harboring wrongs done against me, things that anger me, or hateful feelings. Rather, my heart should nourish repentance and forgiveness, kindness and love.

After Pascha, we will go back to eating meat and dairy products. But we should not go back to those things that we have made the effort to overcome. In our relationship with Christ, we want to imitate His way of life – thinking as He thought, speaking as He spoke, doing things that He did, loving and forgiving as He loves and forgives. This is the Orthodox Way of Life from which we should never depart.

The Ultimate Goal

The ultimate purpose of the Lenten Season is the ultimate goal of all our lives – to come ever closer to Christ, to be more like Him, to become a saint. We call this process “theosis” – being like God, becoming by grace what He is by nature. Lent is the best time to begin anew making that effort. Our Lord calls us to that goal, that purpose, near the end of His Sermon on the Mount, when He says, *“Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48).

This is a tall order, indeed, and some of us may not achieve it the first time ... or the second ... or the next time around. However, God rewards our effort and encourages us to “keep on trying.” Like a loving father, waiting on bended knees for his child to walk uprightly to him from a distance, God is waiting for us to focus on Him, to come to Him, to commune with Him ... and indeed for us to be forever with the One Who loves us more than we love ourselves.

Have a blessed and joyous Fast ... a rewarding and God-pleasing Great Fast ... one that will truly lead us to all the blessings that await us at the end, at the Glorious Resurrection.

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

+ Archbishop Michael

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