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Archpastoral Letter for the Great Fast 2021

Protocol Number 01-001/2021

Sunday of Forgiveness, March 14, 2021

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

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

In the very first sermon Our Lord ever preached and so many other times that He spoke, the theme was the same: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matthew 4:17). Our Church recalls that message throughout the year, but most especially during the season of the Great Fast, when she calls her spiritual children to repentance.

So often we think of repentance, and of Great Lent, in negative terms: the added burdens of more services and longer prayers; the “giving up” of meat and dairy products and the desserts we love; and a call to come to confession, viewed by many as the most difficult of sacraments.

But there is another way, a positive manner, of viewing repentance. The word “repentance” – in Greek, *“metanoia”* – literally means the “turning around” of our *“nous”* – which the Holy Fathers interpret as our “heart.” It is turning our hearts back to God, after immersing ourselves in the things of the world; it is coming back home to the Father, like the prodigal son did, after squandering our time and talents; it is opening up our hearts and once again enthroning God there, where our passions have been ruling. Rather than looking at Lent as a time of dreaded demands, let us look at it as the Saints of our Church have viewed it: a time of renewal, an opportunity for regeneration, another chance for us to regain our inheritance as sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father.

In Thanksgiving

As this Lenten Season begins, with gratitude to God, let us rejoice in the fact that at the present time, the rate of incidence of COVID-19 is decreasing within the territory of our Diocese of New York and New Jersey and throughout our country. Moreover, in recent months our church communities have been able to gather in greater numbers, and many persons are availing themselves of vaccinations against the Coronavirus. The start of the Great Fast 2021 is the perfect opportunity for as many of us as possible to return home to the bosom of our Mother Church and the family of our parish community. It is the perfect opportunity to be together again in church – to offer thanksgiving to GOD for preserving us amidst the trials of the pandemic, and to gather in prayerful remembrance of those taken from us during this season of profound struggle, sickness, and grief.

During the next several weeks, the Church will provide us with several avenues of coming closer to Christ our Savior, opening ourselves to Him, and enthroning Him in our hearts as “Lord and Master of my life.” Among them are Prayer, Divine Services, Fasting, Almsgiving, and the Holy Mysteries. I urge you to take these seriously, create a personal discipline that includes as much of them as possible, and thus re-establish as close a relationship as you can with Christ, “*the author and perfecter of our faith*” (Hebrews 12:2).

Prayer

A child will ask, “*Why do we pray?*” We pray because we seek communion with God, and we pray because the Lord Himself gave us that example – before every event in His life recorded in the Gospel of Luke, He is found to be at prayer, privately on a mountain or in a garden, away from everyone, alone in communion with the Father. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Christ instructs us, “*When you pray (not “if”, but “when”), go into your room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father Who is in the secret place; and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you openly*” (Matthew 6:6) ... and then after telling us not to pray like the heathen with vain repetitions, He gives us the model for praying – the Lord's Prayer – for calling upon God, saying: “*Our Father who art in heaven ...*”.

I encourage all of you to increase your prayer life this Lenten Season, drawing closer to God through a more faithful daily conversation with Him, from the depth of your soul, before your Icon Corner. Whether you add an extra prayer, an extra repetition of the Jesus Prayer, or an extra canon of repentance, set a rule for yourself that you will follow faithfully every day. If you need guidance, ask your spiritual father. But turn aside from all the excuses of the hustle and bustle of daily pressures, and open your heart through sincere prayer to the Lord Who loves us more than we love ourselves.

Divine Services

That same young person may ask, “*Why do we need to go to Church?*” We go in order to further our relationship with the Lord – through corporate, liturgical prayer, together with our family of faith – and because Jesus Himself gave us that example, by attending services in the synagogue every Sabbath and in the temple every feast day. Our Church offers us several services to participate in throughout the Great Fast, in addition to Saturday evening Vespers and the Sunday Liturgy: Forgiveness Vespers to open this sacred season, the Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete to introduce the theme of repentance during the first week; Memorial Saturdays when we remember our loved ones who have gone to eternal rest; the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy which offers us additional opportunities to receive the precious Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. During Holy Week, we are invited to gather for the Bridegroom Matins and the full complement of very special services that make present to us the events of the last week of the life of the Suffering Servant Who “*was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities...and by Whose stripes we are healed*” (Isaiah 53:5).

I urge all of our dedicated clergy to offer as many of the prescribed liturgical services as possible, in order to give your parishioners every opportunity to grow closer to the Lord in this sacred season. I urge all those parishioners who are healthy and able, to strive to attend as many divine

services during Lent as they possibly can. Our liturgical worship is patterned after the heavenly worship which John the Theologian was privileged to see in the vision of Revelation 4-5. We must truly love these divine services, because they are a taste of the heavenly worship we hope to share in for all eternity.

Fasting

“Why do we fast?” The obvious answer is that Our Lord Himself fasted forty days and forty nights, eating nothing, after which, the Gospel tells us, He was hungry. Fasting is an ascetical exercise which shows that we have control over our bodies, over food, over drink. Our fasting reverses the failure of Adam and Eve who did not fast from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Jesus tells us, *“When you fast (not “if”, but “when”), do not be like the hypocrites ...”* (Matthew 6:16). The centuries-old calendar of our Church eases us into the prescribed fasting guidelines: on Meat-fare Sunday, we give up meat and meat products, and abstain from them until Pascha; on Cheese-fare Sunday, we give up cheese and other milk products, and abstain from them until the Feast of the Resurrection. This is a small sacrifice when we consider that Our Lord gave up His life on the Cross for us and for our salvation. I urge all our diocesan clergy and faithful to follow this time-honored tradition of our faith and embrace the guidelines of fasting this Lenten Season as faithfully as we are able.

But fasting is more than abstaining from food. It is also, and more importantly, abstaining from sin. Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk instructs us in this area of our spiritual life with these words: *“An excellent faster is one who restrains himself from every impurity, who imposes abstinence on his tongue and restrains it from idle talk, foul language, slander, condemnation, flattery, and all manner of evil speaking, who abstains from anger, rage, malice and vengeance, and withdraws from every evil.”* I pray that we will all be able to live this Great Fast in the spirit of the wisdom of this great Saint of our Church.

Almsgiving

“Why should we do acts of charity?” Again, because the Lord Himself did works that revealed love. He gave of Himself to make the blind see, the deaf hear, the crippled walk, and the dead rise. He calls upon us to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, shelter to the stranger, clothing to the naked, visitation to the sick and imprisoned. And when you have done this, in the Parable of the Last Judgment, He tells us, *“you did it to Me.”* He wants us not to do charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. *“When (again – not “if”, but “when”) you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet ... do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”* (Matthew 6:1,6).

In this Lenten Season, the Saints of our Church encourage us to do even more works of charity than we do usually. The Holy Fathers direct us to use the money we have not spent on the rich foods – from which we are abstaining – to help feed the poor and hungry. Saint Basil guides us to consider that the clothes or shoes in our closets we are not using really belong to those who have none. St. John Chrysostom says so beautifully in one of his famous sermons: *“Almsgiving is giving to Christ Himself, at an altar more holy than that in the sanctuary”* (Homily 20 on 2 Cor.). In this spirit, I urge that all of us seek to do works of almsgiving, from the funds we save by fasting, that will be of assistance to the *“least of the brethren”* – in the name of the Lord Himself.

The Mysteries

“Why Confession? Why Communion?” The most intimate expressions of our relationship with Our Lord are the Holy Mysteries. The Lenten Season is the perfect time to “spring clean” our souls of all that has accumulated over the past months – to say with the prodigal son, realizing that we have distanced ourselves from our real home and squandered our spiritual inheritance, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee ...”* The Scripture instructs us, *“Confess your sins ...”* (James 5:16). If we do confess them, Saint John tells us, *“He (Christ) is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). If we do not give them up in confession, they remain ours; they remain within us, polluting and destroying our souls. And *“if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”* (1 John 1:8). Thus, Saint Paul warns us: *“So let a man examine himself, and then let him eat of the Bread and drink of the Cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's Body”* (1 Corinthians 11:29).

To partake of the precious Body and Blood of our Lord God and Savior is the summit of the sacramental life. To commune in the Eucharist with the Son of God is to become one with Him: *“He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood abides in Me, and I in Him ... whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”* (John 6:54,56). What greater way is there to celebrate the great events of Holy Week and Pascha than to join with the Apostles and all the Saints, and all the members of the Orthodox Church throughout the world and throughout all of time, in eating the Flesh and drinking the Blood of the Savior in Holy Communion? This is what He asked be done on the night before His saving Passion: *“Take, eat ... drink of it. all of you ... Do this in remembrance of Me”* (Luke 22:19). To fail to do this means spiritual death: *“Unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you have no life in you”* (John 6:53). Let us, therefore, join together in the supreme act of thanksgiving and praise to the Lord in His Church, by receiving His precious Body and Blood, uniting ourselves to Him in Holy Communion ... and not just this Lent, but always.

An Appeal

Dearly beloved in Christ: *“Let us enter the Fast with joy, O faithful. Let us not be sad. Let us cleanse our faces with the waters of dispassion, blessing and exalting Christ forever. Let us begin the Fast with joy. Let us give ourselves to spiritual efforts. Let us cleanse our souls. Let us cleanse our flesh. Let us fast from the passions as we fast from foods, taking pleasure in the good works of the Spirit and accomplishing them in love, that we may all be made worthy to see the Passion of Christ our God and His Holy Pascha, rejoicing with spiritual joy”* (Forgiveness Sunday Vespers).

Through prayer and fasting and almsgiving, through divine services and the Holy Mysteries, let us, as a bride, prepare to receive the Heavenly Bridegroom, our Lord and Savior. May our motto for this Lenten Season be the words of Saint Paul: *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life which I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20).

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