

CATECHETICAL HOMILY
AT THE OPENING
OF HOLY AND GREAT LENT

+ BARTHOLOMEW
BY GOD'S MERCY
ARCHBISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE-NEW ROME
AND ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH
TO THE PLENITUDE OF THE CHURCH,
MAY THE GRACE AND PEACE
OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST,
TOGETHER WITH OUR PRAYER, BLESSING AND FORGIVENESS
BE WITH YOU ALL

* * *

Most honorable brothers and blessed children in the Lord,

We glorify the God in Trinity, who has once again guided us as Church to the venerable and blessed period of Holy and Great Lent, the arena of physical and spiritual discipline and ascetic struggle, in order to prepare ourselves in a manner according to Christ and journey in humility to the Holy and Great Week and life-giving Resurrection of the Lord.

Ascetic discipline is of course not only a feature of Holy and Great Lent; nor is it solely a matter of concern and obligation to monastics; nor again is it a result of external influence on the Christian ethos, a foreign element in our devotional life. Asceticism belongs to the core of Christian existence and the life of the Church. It constitutes a calling by Christ to His faithful and a witness of His saving presence in our lives. As believers, we do not address an impersonal or inaccessible God, but the incarnate Word that revealed the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit, the fullness of grace and freedom. In this sense, filled with divine blessings and especially profound experiences, Holy and Great Lent remains a dynamic expression and revelation of the treasure and truth of church life in its entirety.

Nothing in the life of the believer is fragmentary or an end in itself. Life in Christ is holistic and undivided. Repentance, humility, prayer, fasting, good deeds – all of these are intertwined and orient the believer to the Eucharist of the Church, the eschatological

mystery of the Kingdom. Ascetic struggles are the beginning, the “narrow gate” that leads us to the Holy of Holies. In our tradition, there is never “asceticism for the sake of asceticism.” Ascetic discipline is always a journey; it is fulfilled when it becomes part of the Church, when it leads us to communion of the Sacred Mysteries, which in turn incorporate us into the movement of the Church toward the Kingdom. Let us remind you of the example of St. Mary of Egypt, who is honored on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. After forty years of harsh ascetic struggle and unceasing prayer, she sought to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ from the hands of St. Zosimas in full knowledge that Holy Communion is the source of life and medicine of immortality. In the same vein, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete, 2016), which described fasting as “a great spiritual feat” and “the expression par excellence of the ascetic ideal of the Orthodox Church,” emphasizes that “the true fast affects the entire life in Christ of the faithful and is crowned by their participation in divine worship, particularly in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist” (*The Importance of Fasting and its Observance Today*, § 1 and 3).

There is no Orthodox spirituality without participation in the Divine Eucharist, through which as believers we become one body, a communion of persons, the community of life, participants of the “common salvation” in Christ the Savior, who is the “common good.” Therefore, fasting is submission and obedience to the rule of the Church, a communal experience. Holy and Great Lent is an invitation for us to discover the Church as a place and way of sanctification and sanctity, as a foretaste and image of the splendid radiance, of the fullness of life and of the complete joy in the eschatological Kingdom. Experientially and theologically it is impossible for us to comprehend the spirit of Holy and Great Lent if we do not perceive it as a journey toward Pascha. The entire period of fasting preserves the “paschal perception” of life. Gloomy asceticism is a perversion of the Christian experience; it is the ignorance of the imminent grace and future Kingdom; it is life “as if Christ never came,” without expectation of the “resurrection of the dead” and of “life in the age to come.”

This spirit was the experience of the Fast before Pascha in the early Church, where it was a time when the catechumens prepared for Holy Baptism during the Divine Liturgy on the night of Resurrection. Even when, later, the catechetical nature of this period of fasting was replaced by the ethos of repentance, the experience of “repentance” as a “second baptism” was nevertheless preserved and remains as the existential disposition that leads us once more to the paschal eucharistic fullness of ecclesiastical life,

to the home of the Father, to the communion of the Holy Spirit. In this case, too, the “lifting of the cross” comprises the way to the ineffable joy of the Resurrection.

The same salvific truth of the Orthodox faith, piety and spirituality will also be emphasized by the event of the sanctification of the Holy Myrrh, which, by the grace of God, we will officiate at this year during Holy Week at our Sacred Center. This blessed and “divinely efficacious” oil of the “Eucharist of Myrrh” transmits the diverse gifts and manifold charisms of the Holy Spirit through the Sacrament of Chrismation upon the newly-illuminated “heavenly citizen” for strength and participation in the life of the Church – and foremost the communion of the Sacred Mysteries – as well as for the divinely inspired presence in the world and witness of the gift of grace and hope that lies in us. The character of the Holy Spirit as “force of communion” is also manifested in the way that the Holy Myrrh is prepared by boiling ingredients offered by the local Orthodox Churches as well as in the place and time of its blessing within the eucharistic assembly, immediately following the sanctification of the Holy Gifts, but equally in the other church uses of Holy Myrrh, such as the chrismation of heterodox and lapsed entering the Orthodox Church, the consecration of churches and holy altars, antimenses, and so forth.

With these sentiments, as we pray that the arena of fasting will prove smooth and our journey toward the Lord’s Pascha will be unimpeded, we invoke upon you – our most honorable brothers in Christ and beloved children of the Mother Church of Constantinople throughout the world – the life-giving grace and great mercy of Christ our God, who forever blesses the ascetic achievements of His people.

Holy and Great Lent 2022

✠ **BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople**

Your fervent supplicant for all before God

To be read in churches on Cheesefare Sunday, March 6, 2022, immediately after the Holy Gospel.