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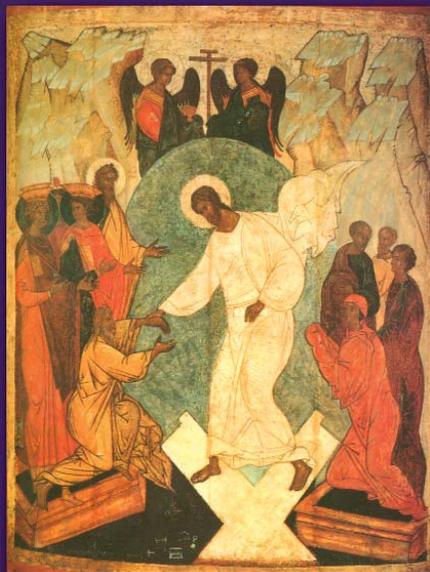


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~ WEEKLY ~
Spiritual
Reflections
for
Great Lent



Journey to Pascha



ASSEMBLY OF CANONICAL
ORTHODOX BISHOPS
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

INTERNATIONAL
ORTHODOX
CHRISTIAN CHARITIES

GREAT LENT

Journey to Pascha

As we begin the season of Great Lent, we invite you to read this booklet of weekly reflections, written especially for you by clergy and laity who are members of IOCC's Board of Directors and supporters of International Orthodox Christian Charities. It is our hope that these reflections will enrich your journey of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.

"Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven ... But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be a secret; and your Father who sees the secret will Himself reward you openly."

— Matthew 6:1, 3-4



The Sunday of Orthodoxy

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

+ Archbishop Nicolae
Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese
in the Americas

The first Sunday of Lent is dedicated to the victory of the Orthodox faith over heresies. The Holy Fathers who assembled in the Ecumenical Councils between the fourth and eighth centuries established the correct teaching about the divinity of the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, as well as the true veneration of icons.

The Sunday of Orthodoxy reminds us about this struggle against and victory over heretics, one that is synthesized in the reestablishment of the veneration of icons.

In helping one who is suffering, we discover the image of Christ and give it back to the world.

The icon is a window toward the Absolute that reveals to us the transfigured world, the world of those who partake in divine grace and bring us this transfiguration, which is holiness. The representation of saints in icons, following the representation of the Savior, is justified by the incarnation of the Word of God: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (*John 1:14*). But the icon is based not only on the incarnation of the Son of God but also on His resurrection.

Without Christ's resurrection the icon would not be a representation of transfigured life but only a commemorative painting. This means that the icon brings God among us, while it also raises us to the understanding of our life as participation in the life of God. This is Christian life revealed by the icon – the

human person restored as the image of God, the human person moving toward holiness, toward the brightness of the image of God shining on his face.

This image of God restored in the face of one's neighbor is revealed by IOCC in its entire ministry of help to our brethren in need. In the face of our suffering brother, we discover the suffering Christ. In helping one who is suffering, we discover the image of Christ and give it back to the world. The one who is saved from suffering and helped in his need becomes again the bearer of the luminous image of Christ, the Christian on the pathway of holiness.

We who participate become partakers in the ministry of God fulfilled in the world unto our own healing and sanctification. The proper veneration of icons is an opportunity for us to penetrate the mystery of our own life and our neighbor's life, to understand the value of the human person – our own, but also that of our neighbor.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

— *John 1:14*

St. Gregory Palamas

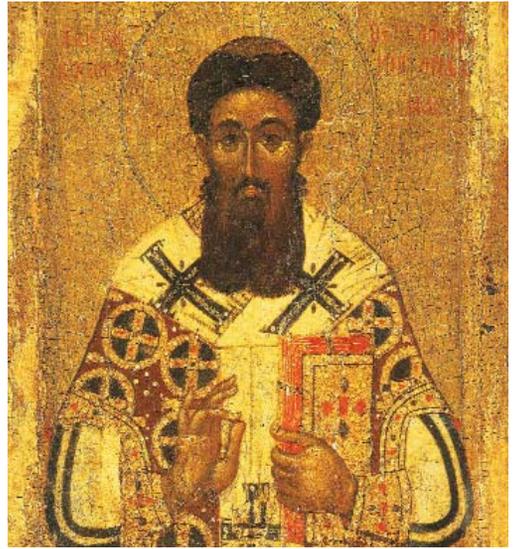
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Father Nicholas Triantafilou

Before our Lord embarked on His public ministry, following His baptism, He withdrew to the wilderness for 40 days of prayer and fasting. In our modern thinking, it might have made more sense for Jesus to ride the wave of popularity inaugurated at His baptism – when the heavens opened, the Spirit descended upon Him, and the Father’s voice proclaimed, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” – and immediately begin His teaching. But our Lord knew that God’s will could only be fully accomplished after His own silence and preparation.

When we make the time to experience God in a personal way, then we are equipped to present God and His will in the world through our actions.

Great Lent is a journey of preparation for us. Before we can go out and live our Christian faith, we too are called to descend to a place of inner stillness in prayer and fasting. St. Gregory Palamas, whom we commemorate this second Sunday of Great Lent, is a spiritual giant of ascetic discipline and acquiring this “inner stillness” or “silence” called hesychasm.



The Desert Fathers say, “A man who cannot be silent has nothing to say.” In this silence, we drown out the noise of the world; we find peace; we gain strength; we listen to the voice of God; we are illumined with the Mt. Tabor light within ourselves; and, as St. Gregory Palamas argues, we experience God Himself.

Our Lord said, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Great Lent reminds us to stop scurrying around and being anxious like Martha and to concentrate on the “one needful thing” like Mary. When we make the time to experience God in a personal way – when we take our own 40-day sojourn in the wilderness – then we are equipped to present God and His will in the world through our actions. We prepare during Great Lent to die with Christ so that we may share in His resurrection and be little “Christs” to the world.



Veneration of the Cross

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Father Leonid Kishkovsky

Through the Cross joy has come into all the world.

At the midpoint of Great Lent, Orthodox Christians are invited to the Veneration of the Cross of Christ. In the Lenten journey, we are taught to be mindful of the importance of repentance, fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and forgiveness. Without these, our spiritual pilgrimage is lacking in meaning. We cannot be disciples of Christ without these marks of Christian life and practice.

After an enthusiastic beginning of Great Lent, little by little we show signs of being tired, our attention begins to flag, our love for God and neighbor begins to wear out. In

other words, our own comfort again becomes the priority.

The veneration of the Cross renews and refocuses our Lenten journey by bringing our attention back to Christ, back to the love of God for us. This love is given as a gift to us in the form of the Cross, the symbol both of Christ's suffering and of the resurrection. We are taught by Jesus Christ to take up our own cross and follow Him. To venerate the Cross of Christ is to be inspired, strengthened, and enabled to carry our cross.

All of the above is true. Yet it is incomplete. An important dimension is missing – the dimension of joy. "Through the Cross joy has come into all the world." These words in a hymn of the Resurrection reveal the dimension of joy as central and essential. Where there is faith without joy, faith is deficient. Where there is almsgiving without joy, charity is deficient. Where there is love, there is joy. Where there is Christ, there is joy.

The veneration of the Cross renews and refocuses our Lenten journey by bringing our attention back to Christ, back to the love of God for us.

As we walk the pilgrimage of Great Lent, let it be full of joy, and therefore full of Christ.

St. John Climacus

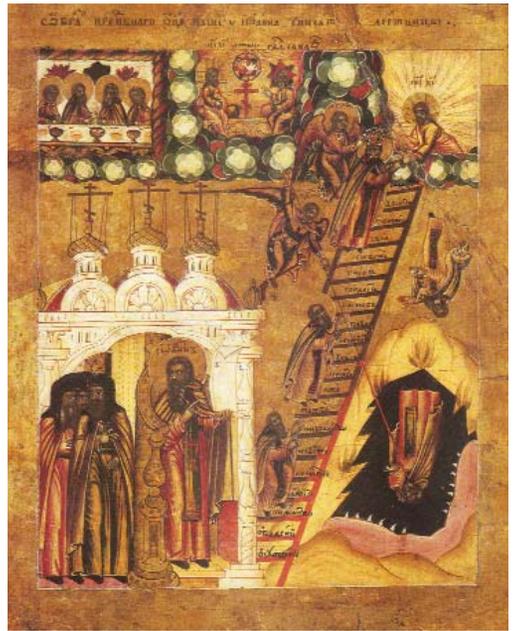
FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Gayle E. Woloschak, PhD

St. John Climacus (or St. John of the Ladder) was a monk of Mt. Sinai who lived and wrote in the seventh century. He is venerated in the Orthodox Church on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent because of his spiritual struggles and his authorship of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a book that describes the spiritual struggle to climb closer to God through acquiring ascetic virtues. There are 30 steps on the ladder that correspond to the 30 years of Christ's life, with the entire volume divided into three main sections: general virtues; instruction on overcoming vices and building up the corresponding virtues; and higher virtues that lead to the goals at which ascetic life aims, including prayer, stillness, dispassion, and finally love (*agape*).

The Ladder was originally written at the request of the abbot of a neighboring monastery, but now its use is widespread in the Church and even in the broader Christian community. Orthodox Christians are called upon to read this book during Lent, and monasteries in particular often read the entire text in the refectory during the Lenten season.

This book calls all to purification through a series of cleansing steps, including denial of self and caring for others. We are invited to examine



We are invited to examine ourselves in order to learn our faults and purify.

ourselves in order to learn our faults and purify. Caring for others is a way of cleansing through decreasing our focus on the self. Ultimately, if one is able to follow St. John's steps, the final goal – the love of others – is accomplished. St. John's message is one of repentance, of changing around one's life. St. John wrote, "Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. And assuredly, the angel who guards you will honor your patience. He who really keeps account of his actions considers as lost every day in which he does not mourn, whatever good he may have done in it."



St. Mary of Egypt

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Very Reverend Father Michael Ellias

On the fifth Sunday of Great Lent, the Church provides us with one final theme of prayer and repentance before we enter Holy Week, the life of St. Mary of Egypt. St. Mary explained to Abba Zosimas, "I was born in Egypt, and when I was 12 years old, I left my parents and went to Alexandria. There I gave myself to unrestrained sensuality. For more than 17 years I lived like that."

Mary described how she boarded a ship of pilgrims on its way to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Upon arrival she attempted to enter the

church, but a force prevented her entrance. She realized that she had to repent of her sinful ways, and the Blessed Theotokos revealed to her that salvation awaited her in the desert beyond the Jordan River by means of continual prayer and fasting.

Let us reach out to the poor and destitute throughout the world with the inspiration of St. Mary of Egypt.

Abba Zosimas asked her, "How many years have passed since you began to live in the desert?" She replied, "It is 47 years." Abba Zosimas asked, "What food do you find here?" She said, "I had two and a half loaves of bread when I crossed the Jordan. Eating a little at a time, I finished them after a few years."

On this Sunday of Great Lent, the Church encourages us to emulate this powerful example of lifelong repentance by prayer and fasting. While we all surely eat more than two and a half loaves of bread in a few years, our meager fasting should heighten our compassion for the poor and the hungry, and whatever resources we are able to preserve by fasting become available for "the least of these my brethren." Let us reach out to the poor and destitute throughout the world with the inspiration of St. Mary of Egypt, especially during this time of tumult and suffering.

Palm Sunday

SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Very Reverend
Stavrofor Srboljub Jockovic

My dear brothers and sisters, we have the Palm Sunday game day advantage. We know Christ's tale about riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. We are living in a time far enough removed from Christ's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem to know He was not coming as the destroyer of oppressive civil rule. He was not the vanquisher of taxes. He was not calling for military conquests or political coups. His was not an earthly kingdom. He was and is the Savior of sinners. The Victor of Life. The King of Kings.

We have the benefit of Holy Scriptures, wisdom of the Holy Fathers, homilies of hierarchs, guidance from our spiritual fathers, and we have our own Orthodox Christian faith.

We have the benefit of Holy Scriptures, wisdom of the Holy Fathers, homilies of hierarchs, guidance from our spiritual fathers, and we have our own Orthodox Christian faith. We know Christ did not enter Jerusalem to achieve the self-interested expectations of crowds who would soon turn on Him. He came to fulfill His Father's mission. He came to save us from ourselves. He came to



overcome death by His own death and to grant us eternal life. He didn't affirm the zealous enmity of the crowd. He asked for love. Prayer. Repentance. Love for our neighbors as ourselves. Even love for our enemies.

We are blessed to be able to manifest our understanding of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem in many ways. We can feed the hungry, comfort strangers, clothe the naked, heal illness, and visit oppression. We can change a family in need in the US or across the world. We can change a village in distress. We can change a country in peril.

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! He saves our souls. He lifts our spirits. He enlightens our darkness. Praise Him! Glorify Him!