

Orthodox Church in America

Diocese of New York and New Jersey

ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR THE GREAT FAST 2013

“We have come to know the gift of the fast of Isaiah. That a true fast has been handed down to us. Therefore let us agree, as it has been taught, that we won’t be looking gloomy. Rather, we will look upon the days of the fast cheerfully as is fitting for saints. Don’t make being healed gloomy. It is outrageous that you don’t rejoice over your soul being healed, but you mourn over changing food. You seem to be giving more concern to your stomach than to your spirit” (Saint Basil, “About Fasting” 31:164).

Beloved Concelebrants at the Holy Altar and Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!

The Scriptures and the Holy Fathers tell us that the purpose of our spiritual life, in fact the very purpose of our whole life, is to imitate Christ our Lord, be like God, and become by grace what our Savior is by nature -- sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, “partakers of the divine nature” (II Peter 1:4). The life-long process of achieving this goal is called “*theosis*” or “*deification*” ... and it is the process of becoming what we were created to be -- saints!

While every day of our life each of us should be working toward this goal, the Fast of Great Lent is, in particular, the sacred season during which we are to focus on our quest for eternal life in the heavenly kingdom. Our beloved mother, the Holy Church, provides us with great means of realizing our God-given potential: prayer, reading the scriptures, attending the divine services, fasting, almsgiving, and partaking of the holy mysteries.

All too often, we see the Great Fast in negative terms: The Church wants me to give up meat and dairy products; to pray more and read the Bible and come to Lenten services instead of watching TV and enjoying other forms of entertainment; to give to the poor and other causes; and to come to confession! That’s seven weeks of heavy burdens on my already overstretched personal life!

There is a story of a monk who was once met by a non-Orthodox man, who looked at his long hair and beard, his flowing black robe and his long prayer rope, and asked the elder why he burdened himself with those external rituals. The monk replied, “If a man were carrying a knapsack full of rocks on his journey, he would surely complain of their burden. But if he were carrying the same weight in diamonds, he would never complain because of their value. I don’t consider these things as burdensome rocks -- to me, they are diamond opportunities to strengthen my faith in the Lord!”

My prayer for all of us is that we will see the time-honored practices of Great Lent not as heavy burdens in our life but as diamond opportunities -- to come closer to the Lord through a richer prayer life, a deeper knowledge of His Gospel, and more frequent participation in the Liturgy and other divine services; to undertake a humbler diet and quieter lifestyle, following Christ’s own example; to use the funds we would otherwise spend on our own leisure to provide instead for “the least of the brethren” in need; and through the Holy Mysteries of Repentance and the Eucharist to purge our soul of the poison of sin and unite our self to the Son of God, Who died on the Cross for our salvation.

And, my sincere hope is that each of us will embark upon our Lenten journey toward the heavenly kingdom with joy -- bearing the knapsack of the precious jewels of our faith that will enable us to become more and more like the One Who loves us more than we love ourselves. To Him be all glory!

With love in His Name,

+ M I C H A E L

Bishop of New York and the

Diocese of New York and New Jersey