

## I – The Triodion

ON THE ISLAND OF ZAKYNTHOS a unique ceremony takes place at the beginning of the Triodion. The book of the Triodion is placed on a stand before the icon of Christ. Before the first hymn from this book is chanted, the volume is presented to the bishop. He venerates it as if it were an icon, followed by all the clergy. Then the book is presented to the chanter who intones the first hymn. The time of the Triodion has begun.

The term *Triodion* refers to the ten weeks leading up to Pascha as well as to the book which contains the hymns, readings and prayers proper to this season. *Triodion* literally means “three odes” and refers to the canons at daily Orthros which contain three rather than the usual nine odes.

The Triodion as we have it today was organized by Studite monks in ninth-century Constantinople. They drew chiefly on texts from the Patriarchate of Jerusalem by a number of outstanding hymnographers, including Andrew of Crete, Cosmas of Maiuma and John of Damascus – some twenty composers in all.

In general the prayers and services of the Triodion may be considered a great catechesis for the faithful, setting forth the entire scope of divine revelation through the reading of several books from the Old Testament and allusions to many others in the Great Canon and other hymns as well as patristic homilies and chants based on still other sacred texts. This catechesis is not about imparting information but about motivating us to embrace the great task of the season: repentance and the renewal of our life in Christ.

This ten-week period is made up of the following components:

- The pre-Fast weeks which ease us into the practices of the Great Fast;
- The six-week long Great Fast itself;
- The two-fold feast of Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday; and
- The Great and Holy Week of the Lord’s Passion.

### The Pre-Fast Weeks

Documents from the sixth through the eighth centuries attest to a growing custom in the East of observing one week in preparation for the Great Fast. Today this pre-Fast period in the Byzantine Churches consists in the following:

- Two Sundays in which the Gospel readings at the Divine Liturgy invite us to reflect on humility (Pharisee and Publican) and God’s ever-welcoming love (Prodigal Son).
- A **Fast-Free Week** between these two Sundays in which we are told *not* to fast, lest we take pride in our efforts like the Pharisee.
- **Meat-Fare Week**, the last time meat is eaten before Pascha. This week includes a Saturday of the Dead in which we make a general commemoration of all who have gone before us.

- ***Cheese-Fare Week***, the last time dairy products are eaten before Pascha. Cheese-Fare Week ends with Forgiveness Sunday and the ultimate preparation for the Fast: mutual forgiveness.

### **Fasting and Our Renewal**

The preparation for the Great Fast in the Byzantine Churches focuses to a great extent on fasting. Why is fasting so emphasized if the purpose of this season is the renewal of our life in Christ?

In the Scriptures the great “icon” of our communion with God is “*Eden, the Garden of God*” (Ez 28:13) where God walked with Adam and Eve. That communion was broken by eating the so-called forbidden fruit. Eating became the sign of choosing one’s own will over the will of God. This is why the first way in which the devil tempted Christ concerned food. Fasting – not eating – is thus a symbol of putting aside our own will in order to recover our communion with God.

In our society, where food is so abundant, eating is an even more fitting symbol for doing our own will. We can choose to eat whatever we feel like. We can pass up foods which don’t please us. We throw away food without a second thought. We may not be able to indulge our lust for power or wealth very easily; we can always reach for another piece of cake.

Many people prepare for Lent by deciding what they will give up. Fasting in the Christian East is not a matter of personal choice, but of surrendering one’s will to the Church which determines when and how to fast. This does not mean that the fasting rules are unchangeable, but one should have the blessing of one’s spiritual guide before excusing oneself from the fast. The heart of the fast is putting aside one’s ego.

In the Great Fast we refrain from eating for at least part of each day (until noon, or mid-afternoon or until we receive the Eucharist) for 40 days. This number recalls the 40-day fasts of Moses before receiving the Ten Commandments (see Ex 34:27-29) and of Elijah before encountering God on Mount Horeb (see 1 Kgs 19:8-12). For Christians, of course, the Lord Jesus’ 40-day fast in the wilderness after His baptism stands out as the foremost example of fasting and communion with God.

During the pre-Fast weeks of the Triodion we prepare for our 40-day fast by ***abstinence*** – not eating certain foods while continuing to eat others. Many people consider abstinence to be fasting; in fact it is merely a part of fasting. We fast completely for a period of time. Then when we do eat, we abstain from eating X, Y, and Z.

### **Why Animal Products?**

Again let us return to the Garden of God. In the book of Genesis we read that God said to our first parents, “*See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food*” (Gen 1:29). Fruits and vegetables, nuts and grains made up the diet of humanity both before

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and after the fall (see Gen 3:18). It was only after the flood, when the earth had been laid waste, that God tells Noah, “*The fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you*” (Gen 9:2, 3). In abstaining from animal products, then, we are returning to the “food of paradise,” the diet of the first created, to symbolize our desire to recover the communion with God for which they were made.

### **Homily 45 by St Theodore the Studite**

Brethren: fasting is the renewal of the soul, for the Apostle says that as the body weakens and withers from the ascetic labor of fasting, then is the soul renewed day by day. It is made beautiful and shines in the beauty which God originally bestowed upon it. And when it is purified and adorned with fasting and repentance, then God loves it and will live in it as the Lord has said: “*I and the Father will come and make Our abode with him*” (Jn 14.23). . . . Now at the beginning the Fast seems laborious, but if we shall apply ourselves from day to day with ardor and discipline, then with the help of God it will be made easier. At the same time, if we desire that the Fast be true and acceptable to God, then together with abstaining from food, let us restrain ourselves from every sin of soul and body, as the sticheron instructs us: “Let us keep the Fast not only by refraining from food, but by becoming strangers to all sinful passions” (Aposticha at Vespers, First Tuesday in the Great Fast).

### **Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee**

***Thirty Third Sunday after Pentecost – 2 Timothy 3:10-15***

***Sixteenth Sunday of St Luke – Luke 18:1-14***

### **Being Strong in Christ (2 Tm 3:10-15)**

THE GREATEST JOY OF EVERY PRIEST or other mentor may be seeing a pupil follow in his footsteps. St Paul was no exception. He traveled with several disciples at one time or another: Barnabas, John Mark, Silas (all of whom we honor as saints). His favorite, the one he called his “*true son in the faith*” (1 Tm 1:2), was Timothy.

According to Acts 16:1-9, Timothy was a believer, the son of a pagan father and a Jewish mother in the Anatolian town of Lystra. St Paul had first visited Lystra with Barnabas in c. AD 48 and preached the Gospel in the surrounding area. Possibly Timothy’s mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, became believers at that time (see 2 Tm 1:5).

When Paul returned to Lystra three years later he proposed taking Timothy along on his travels. Although Eunice was Jewish, her husband was not and Timothy had not been

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circumcised. Paul arranged for that to be done (see Acts 16:1-5) and the two set off together.

For several years Timothy accompanied Paul on his travels in Europe and Asia Minor. Timothy worked with Paul as he evangelized Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonika, Corinth and Macedonia, sometimes visiting churches on his own as Paul's emissary. In witness to their relationship, Timothy is listed along with Paul as the author of several New Testament epistles: 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. "*He served with me in the gospel,*" Paul would write, "*as a son with his father*" (Phil 2:22).

### **Timothy in Ephesus**

In the early 60s Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to personally oversee that community where doctrinal speculation was rife. St Paul's two Epistles to Timothy offered his former companion guidance in shepherding the Ephesian Christians.

According to the fourth-fifth century *Acts of Timothy*, this disciple remained in Ephesus even after Paul's death. Timothy himself was slain by a mob during a pagan festival in AD 97.

Based on his own experience Paul warned Timothy that, "*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*" (2 Tm 3:12). Paul himself was one of the first to persecute Christians when he was an observant Jew. This persecution began as soon as the apostles started proclaiming Jesus as the risen Messiah.

The Romans, who cared nothing about Jewish messiahs, feared the Christians, who preferred the Kingdom of God to the Roman Empire. They refused to honor the Roman gods – considered a civil duty – or to venerate the emperor as a god himself. They appeared to be a divisive force and they continued to grow.

All the apostles except for John died at the hands of either Jews or Romans intent on eradicating this new sect. Paul himself would suffer death for his faith, beheaded in Rome in c AD 68. Sometimes Christians suffered in sporadic attacks of random mobs. In the second and third centuries it was the state itself which was responsible for many deaths. It is thought that, before the Roman persecutions ended in the early fourth century, upwards of 100,000 believers had lost their lives or been deprived of their possessions.

In the face of persecution St Paul proposes what may at first seem an inadequate, if not strange, response: a two-pronged fidelity to the teachings that Timothy has learned and from whom he learned them. The Word of God and the living witness of the believers who mentored them, Paul affirms, should be the most compelling supports for committed Christians under threat of persecution.

### **What Scriptures Does Paul Recommend?**

"...*from childhood,*" St Paul reminds Timothy, "*you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.*"

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*“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:15-17).*

Just which Scriptures could Timothy have known from his childhood? When St Paul first met Timothy’s family in c. AD 48, and for decades afterwards, not all of the New Testament books had yet been written. In the next 50 years the Gospels and most of the epistles were being circulated but it took some time for all the local Churches to become aware of them or to accept them as inspired. For most of this time – and certainly while Paul was writing to Timothy – when Christians spoke of “the Scriptures,” they meant the Old Testament. St. Paul is encouraging Christians under persecution to resort to Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. As St Clement of Alexandria wrote in his *Exhortation to the Heathens*, “These books are truly holy as they sanctify and deify.”

In this Paul echoes the witness of Abraham in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). When asked to send an emissary from paradise to the rich man’s brothers, Abraham replies, “*They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them*” (v. 29). When the rich man protests, Abraham answers, “*If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead*” (v. 31). Spectacular wonders amaze us but don’t necessarily lead us to faith; the Scriptures speak to truly believing hearts and strengthen the gift of faith within them. This is why St John Chrysostom would comment, “One single word from the divine Scriptures is more effective than fire! It softens the cruelty of the soul and prepares her for every good work” (*Ninth Homily on 2 Tim*).

### **Witness of the Saints**

Besides the Scriptures, St Paul commends to Timothy “*the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them*” (v.14). Timothy had worked with Paul for several years and knew his teaching, which, earlier in the chapter, he called “*my gospel*” (2 Tim 2:8), the saving mystery of Christ which would later be put in writing in the four Gospels. He also knew how Paul lived out his faith in daily life and how he behaved under trials and persecution. The living witness of Timothy’s mentor would be a source of strength for him when he too suffered for his faith in Christ. Over the centuries until today, the encouragement of believing parents and spouses as well as teachers and fellow Christians would provide the support from which martyrs drew the strength to face the suffering they endured for Christ.

Called before time by God and becoming a disciple of holy Paul, you were an initiate in the divine mysteries. Outstanding in your life, keeping the Faith intact until death, you became a faithful hierarch of God, O holy apostle Timothy. After denouncing the worship of idols as foolishness, you were stoned and beaten, receiving the crown of martyrdom. O blessed one, intercede for us who celebrate your sacred memory with faith.

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Come, O people, let us sing to Timothy, the apostle distinguished as a herald of the Gospel. Let us say, "Hail, venerable offshoot of the Faith, who were like a son to holy Paul! Hail, venerable model of virtue, thrice-wise mouth of the divine Word! Hail, divine flute announcing God to the whole world! Hail, pillar of Faith, on which the Church finds support!"

*Vespers Stichera, Feast of St. Timothy (Jan 22)*

### **Humility: Mother of the Virtues (Luke 18:10-14)**

WHEN EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS FIRST BEGAN to list the deadliest passions that can consume a person they invariably considered pride as the most serious. Gluttony, lust or greed focus on material pleasures which can be tempered by physical conditions such as age or health. Pride, however, that increasing fixation with the self, can be with us to the moment of our death. Pride, called the queen or head of the passions, can egg us on to justify ourselves even before the awesome judgment-seat of Christ.

People rarely put their prideful feelings out there for all to see. We learn to keep those thoughts – "I'm better than you... I'm smarter than you..." – to ourselves. But we have them throughout our life and they can poison our relationships with others and even with God.

Pride here does not mean self-respect or taking satisfaction in one's legitimate accomplishments. It rather has the idea of arrogance or superiority toward others because of one's abilities or accomplishments. "I'm cuter than you... I have more toys than you." Pride uses the circumstances of our life to make us disdain others whom we perceive to be weaker, poorer, less educated than ourselves. While envy, wanting what others have, looks up to others more successful than we, pride is the opposite. We look down on those whom we perceive are less than we are.

The Pharisee in the Lord's parable (Lk 18:10-14) does put these feelings into words for us. "I do this, I do that, I'm not like him!" This is a particular temptation of religious people. They may be able to eat or drink in moderation. They may not be troubled by sexual enticements or the lure of possessions. But they are often quick to compare themselves with others whom they perceive as less perfect, if not as sinners.

### **Trusting in Our Own Righteousness**

St Luke tells us that Jesus "*spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others*" (v.9) When we indulge feelings of self-importance and trust in ourselves how can we be trusting in God for our salvation? How can we commit ourselves to any authentic repentance?

The Pharisee saw his actions as guaranteeing his righteousness before God. He did fast twice a week, probably every Monday and Thursday, as was the Jewish custom. He did tithe, giving away ten percent of his income. But he trusted that these actions *guaranteed*

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his righteousness before God. Weekly fasting and contributing out of our material resources are excellent practices, commended in both Jewish and Christian traditions. But it is God alone who makes people righteous through Christ. We do not justify ourselves through any acts of devotion we might adopt. As St Paul would clearly teach, righteousness “...is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph 2:8-9).

Nevertheless, good works have their place, an important one in God’s plan for us. St Paul goes on, “*We are His [i.e. God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them*” (Eph 2:10). The Christian people are “*a new creation*” (2 Cor 5:17), made by God in Christ for a purpose. As a people justified by God’s grace, we exist to perform good works according to God’s plan. While it is God’s grace, not these works that make us holy, we fulfill our new nature by performing them.

### **Trusting that We Are Superior**

The Pharisee is faulted on another score as well. He used his good deeds as clubs to beat down his neighbor. First of all, he judged that the publican did not do any of these things. And in that he may have been right but he also judged that he was better than the publican because of these works.

The publican, on the other hand did not reproach the Pharisee for his judgmental words. As St John Chrysostom points out, “*The publican did not say, ‘Who are you to tell me such things? From what source did you learn of my life? You did not live with me. We did not spend time together. Why are you so haughty? ... Why do you praise yourself?’*” (*On Repentance and Almsgiving*, 24) Rather he prayed humbly repenting over his own sins.

In one sense the Pharisee was right; the publican was a sinner. Publicans lived by extorting payments for themselves over and above what the Roman governors demanded. But the publican here is shown repenting for his sinfulness while, “The Pharisee totally ruined the righteousness of his deeds” (v. 25) by claiming superiority over the publican.

St Augustine in his Sermon 45 on the New Testament, dramatically recasts this scene in the form of a courtroom trial: “You have heard the case of the Pharisee and the publican; now hear the sentence. You have heard the proud accuser and you have heard the humble criminal; now hear the Judge. ‘Truly I say to you,’ says God the Truth, God the Judge, ‘The publican went down from the temple justified rather than the Pharisee... because everyone who exalts himself shall be abased and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.’” In icons the publican is often represented leaving the temple “justified,” with a halo around his head.

We see this praise of humility returning again and again in the pages of St Luke’s Gospel. It forms a major part of Mary’s canticle, the Magnificat: “*He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly*” (Lk 1:51-52). It appears in a warning from Christ on jockeying for the first places at dinners. “*He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noted how*

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*they chose the best places, saying to them: ‘When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, “Give place to this man,” and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, “Friend, go up higher.” Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’* (Lk 14:9-11). As pride is the queen of the passions, so humility is the queen of the virtues.

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican is read as we begin our journey through the Triodion to Pascha as a reminder that, although we may fast more than twice a week during these days, we should not be congratulating ourselves on having earned something. Rather, like the publican we should be ask for God’s mercy since even in doing something good we have the tendency to pervert it as did the Pharisee.

~Every good deed can be made void through foolish pride, while every sin can be cleansed by humility. Let us then embrace humility in faith while we completely turn away from the paths of pride.

~The righteousness of the Pharisee proved useless and was condemned because it was joined to pride. The Publican gained humility, the mother of the virtues which lifts us up on high.

Troparia from the Canon

### **Please Don’t Fast!**

BEGINNING TODAY, the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, the Church calls on us to start preparing for the Great Fast. And how does it tell us to ready ourselves? – by telling us not to fast!

Since the beginnings of the Church Christians have fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, remembering Judas’ betrayal and Christ’s passion. This coming week, however is one of the fast-free weeks of the Church year, when fasting is not prescribed. The other such weeks are part of a Great Feast – the Nativity, Pascha, and Pentecost. This is the only fast-free week not connected with a feast. What is the reason for not fasting this week?

The answer is found in the verse introducing the parable of the publican and the Pharisee read today: *“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable”* (Lk 18.9). Religious people who are “confident of their own righteousness” are complacent, self-satisfied with their level of observance. That level may be minimal – attending church on Sundays or even the greatest observances – or it may be more. The fault is the same whatever the level of observance: the complacent person feels no need to change his or her outlook; and so he allows no

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place for God to act within him. The complacent person thinks that he has complied with all of the requirements of religion. What more can be asked of him?

By setting aside the regular fasts this week the Church is telling the complacent person that what we do is not as important as the spirit in which we do them. Do you take pride in your fasting? Then don't fast lest it leave you like the Pharisee.

### **Challenging Our Religious Complacency**

In addition, religious complacency invariably sets us against others. When we take pride in our level of religious observance our next thought is often "I come to church regularly, not like him.... They're not here for every lenten service ... She's half my age – why does she have to sit down when everyone else is standing?" and the like. We may not make these comments aloud but we don't have to. They have already sullied our heart. As St Cyril of Alexandria reminds us: "What profit is there in fasting twice in the week, if your so doing serves only as a pretext for ignorance and vanity, and make you supercilious and haughty, and selfish?" (*On the Gospel of Luke*, Sermon 120)

Religious complacency also sets us against God, as odd as that may seem. When we see our acts of religion as our passport to heaven we are telling God we have no need of Him. We are saving ourselves. Blessed Theophylact of Ochrid, in his *Explanation of the Gospel of St Luke*, says that there are many offshoots of self-love. "Presumption, arrogance, and vainglory all stem from this root. But the most destructive of all these kinds of self-love is pride, for pride is contempt of God. When a man ascribes his accomplishments to himself, and not to God, this is nothing less than denial of God and opposition to Him."

The error of the Pharisee is to confuse the means with the end. Acts of virtue or piety are meant to dispose our hearts towards communion with God, not turn us in on ourselves. As the late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom wrote, "From the [Pharisee] learn his works, but by no means his pride; for the work by itself means nothing and does not save." We may – and should – do good things as responses to God's love for us. We should not think that fasting, churchgoing or Bible reading automatically bring us to communion with God, merely because they are outwardly observed. Even when we practice religious observances from the best of motives, we can find them emptied of virtue through pride. In the words of St Gregory Palamas, "The unseen patron of evil ... can bring down the roof of good works after its construction, by means of pride and madness."

### **Humility Transforms Us**

The antidote to the boastfulness of the Pharisee is humility which is nothing less than a return to the genuine order of things, the restoration of a realistic view of ourselves and of God. Only He can transform us by granting us a share in His divine life. Of ourselves we can do nothing to earn God's love or to share in His holiness. We can only respond to His eternal love for us by embarking on the path of repentance – that dying to self-love and egocentricity which leads us to life in the kingdom.

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Humility – authentic self-understanding – doesn't come easily at any time. It is deeply opposed to the values of the world. The late Father Alexander Schmemmann saw how humility has no place in our secular culture. He wrote: "If there is a moral quality almost completely disregarded and even denied today, it is indeed humility. The culture in which we live constantly instills in us the sense of pride, self-glorification, and self-righteousness. It is built on the assumption that man can achieve anything by himself and it even pictures God as the one who all the time 'gives credit' for man's achievements and good deeds. Humility – be it individual or corporate, ethnic or national - is viewed as a sign of weakness, as something unbecoming a real man. ..."

Our culture also teaches us to feel superior when others fall. As a rule, the newspapers, TV and other media don't tell us about the positive things people do – that doesn't sell papers. A steady diet of looking at other people's failings leads us to imitating the Pharisee's "I'm not like that that."

A more helpful approach comes from the nineteenth century Russian Saint, John of Kronstadt. He writes: "When the foolish thought of counting up any of your good works enters into your head, immediately correct your fault and rather count up your sins, your continual and innumerable offences against the All-Merciful and Righteous Master, and you will find that their number is as the sand of the sea, whilst your virtues in comparison with them are as nothing."

In the vision of the Gospel, repentance and humility are more important and higher than all of the other virtues, continuing until the end of our life. Today's kondakion sums up the Church's prayer for all of us: "Let us shun the boastful words of the Pharisee and learn from the Publican humility with sighing; let us cry out to our Savior: 'Have mercy on us, You who alone are merciful!'"

### **Troparia from the Canon**

**Vainglory disperses the treasures of righteousness, but humility scatters the multitude of passions. Then grant that we may seek humility, O Savior, and bestow on us the portion of the Publican. (From Ode 3)**

**Though he was rich in virtues, foolish pride brought the Pharisee to poverty, but in his great need the Publican was justified through humility. Let us also gain this humility. (From Ode 4)**

**The Pharisee thought to drive swiftly in the chariot of the virtues; but on foot the Publican outran him, for he yoked humility with compassion. (From Ode 5)**

**Faithful, let us avoid the pride of the Pharisee: Let us not say *We are pure!* as he did; but rightly follow the Publican in his humble thoughts which gained for him God's mercy. (From Ode 8)**

## **Sunday of the Prodigal Son**

*Thirty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – 1 Corinthians 6:12-20*

*Seventeenth Sunday of St Luke – Luke 15:11-32*

### **Glorify God in Your Body (1 Cor 6:12-20)**

MANY PEOPLE TODAY EQUATE “SPIRITUALITY” with one’s personal inner life. Spiritual seekers are advised to “listen to their heart” to find peace and clarity, often without any reference to God – or at least to the God revealed in the Scriptures – or to a community such as the Church. Their approach is more individual rather than communal, more mind-centered than encompassing one’s entire being, and often more concerned with self-help than with living in union with God.

As Eastern Christians we stand in a tradition that first of all understands spirituality as mankind’s relationship to God through the operation of the Holy Spirit. At its root this relationship is based on an event which joins the material and the spiritual: the Incarnation of Christ. The Word of God took flesh, became human in order to unite us with God. Because He is truly and perfectly man, the risen Christ is now glorified in His body, seated at the right hand of the Father.

### **The Body in Eastern Thought**

The body as well as the spirit is important in Christian life. As St Paul says, “*Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s*” (1 Cor 6: 19-20). We are not meant to ignore or belittle the body because we are Christians. The body is not an enemy but a partner and collaborator with the soul in the work of our sanctification. The body, as well as the spirit, is meant to be transfigured in Christ and so we are called to glorify God in it.

### **Purifying the Body**

The first way in which we glorify God in the body is by accepting and affirming its freedom from the control of sin and death. United to Christ in baptism, we have already been given a share in that freedom, which will be completely realized in the life of the world to come. As long as we are in this life, however, we must work along with Christ-in-us to maintain the body’s freedom from the influence of sin.

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And so one way in which we glorify God in the body is by the Church's ascetic tradition, which focuses on freeing the mind and the heart from attachment to the things of the senses. Christian asceticism is not anti-physical but seeks to liberate the body from the lure of the sensual so that the physical may be sanctified.

The Church Fathers considered that the most basic ascetic practices focus on controlling the *passions* or cravings of the body for food and drink and for sexual release. This is not because they are our greatest inner enemies – pride and vanity have that dubious distinction – but because it is easier to conquer our physical cravings than our spiritual impulses. This is why St Paul, in 1 Corinthians, singles out the power of gluttony and lust as the enemy's first line of attack on the believer. "*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?*" (v.15) How can you surrender to the first assault the enemy mounts against you? If we cannot put aside fatty foods on Wednesdays and Fridays, much less during the Fasts, how can we even begin to deal with things like spiritual laziness (sloth) or pride that afflict us in our innermost hearts?

### **Worshipping in the Body**

We live our life in Christ in our bodies as well as in our spirits and so the Eastern Churches have insisted that the body join the spirit in worshipping the One who created us as both physical and spiritual. We bow, we kneel, we make the sign of the cross, we prostrate, we kiss, we eat and we drink. We glorify God in the body by entering body, soul and spirit in the worship of the Church.

One way we glorify God in our bodies at worship is by standing for prayer. In some churches people are directed to stand or sit at different times during the service. Sitting, however, is the stance taken by an audience rather than a participant, whether it be at the theater or at worship. Worshippers are an "audience" during readings or a sermon; during prayers and litanies they are participants and more fittingly stand rather than sit.

Two bodily gestures in Eastern worship not common in the churches of the West are the metany and the prostration. In the metany we make the sign of the cross and bow from the waist, extending our right hand until our fingers touch the ground. In the prostration we kneel on both knees and bow until our forehead touches the ground. Both gestures indicate our complete submission to the King of all.

Making metanies and prostrations requires a certain amount of free space around the worshipper. In older churches abroad any seating (benches or stalls) was located around the church walls leaving the center of the church free for worshippers. In churches with Western-style pews worshippers often move out into the aisles to make prostrations.

### **The Great Fast**

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During the Church' fasts we have ample opportunities to glorify God in the body through more frequent church services and through fasting. Eastern Christian fasting incorporates two ways of using our bodies in worship. In *ascetic or total fasting* we do not eat or drink anything. Period. This kind of fasting is in the spirit of Deutonomy 8:3, quoted by Christ to the tempter, "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*" (Mt 4:4). Traditionally people fast this way before receiving Holy Communion. It is also customary to fast totally for a certain period on all fast days. Thus many fast this way until noon during these seasons.

The second type of fasting, also called abstinence, is fasting from certain foods (typically meat or dairy products). In many Eastern Churches people fast totally until noon and then, when they do eat, they abstain from meat and dairy. Since fish is considered "meat without feet" it is not generally consumed on the stricter fast days.

RELIGIOUS PEOPLE ARE OFTEN ACCUSED of having a negative morality. Faithful believers are not to do this or that and there are "temple police" to make sure that they toe the line. Dietary regulations are often cited as examples of this "negative morality." People are not to eat this or that because God has forbidden it. Obeying these rules is seen as a way of glorifying God.

The apostolic Church did not adopt the idea that certain foods were "unclean," based in part on St Peter's vision in Joppa (see Acts 10:9-16). "*What God has cleansed,*" Peter was told, "*you must not call common*" (v. 15). In the same way it did not adopt the idea taught by some sects at the time that marriage and sexuality were ungodly. Rather the Church espoused the principle stated by St Paul, "*All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any*" (1 Cor 6:12).

### **Being "Under the Power" of Things**

No authentically Christian exercise of asceticism, such as fasting, is done to avoid something evil but to keep us free from inappropriate control by anything. Fasting is one strategy for minimizing the power of food or drink (gluttony), material possessions (greed) or sex (lust) over us.

It is often noted that many people in our society do not have a healthy relationship with food, drink or sex. Many rely on these things to fix emotional problems they were never designed to address. The resulting addictions are simply the most harmful examples of our disordered passions having power over us. As people today say, "What you own, owns you."

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The apostolic Church's teaching that nothing is "unclean" was perhaps too subtle for some early believers. They felt that, if everything was allowed, unlimited consumption was in order. Paul had to remind them that "Nothing is forbidden" does not mean "consume everything you can." Rather, he insisted, "*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful*" (1 Cor 6:12). The believer's goal in life is to be united to God; unlimited consumption does not help us achieve that goal.

St Paul would likely have agreed with Pope Francis' criticisms of modern prosperity as leading to a "culture of waste." We are prodded by film, TV and advertising into continually buying more and throwing away what we tire of. "Consumerism has led us to become so used to an excess" of food and other material goods, the pope says, that we no longer value our humanity, much less our relationship to God. The Church's answer to consumerism – ancient or modern – is fasting.

### **How Do We Fast?**

Most people see fasting as an act of self-denial, but often mistake just what we seek to deny in this observance. Fasting is not so much a denial of food as it is a denial of the ego. In our prosperous society we are used to having whatever we want whenever we want it. Fasting is a means of challenging this impulse to self-satisfaction. When we observe the Church's fast days we are allowing others to determine what we may eat and when we may eat it. We fast when the Church fasts and in the manner that the Church prescribes. There are, of course, always exceptions for health and other reasons but in such cases the tradition would have us seek a blessing from one's spiritual father before mitigating the fast. In that way we would not be determining our own version of the fast; we would still be following the Church, in the person of our confessor.

### **Sexual Morality a Kind of Fasting?**

Our age has become known for the sexual revolution in which any form of sexual expression between consenting adults is ok. Some people even promote sexual activity with children and try to encourage its legalization. The Church, while recognizing that sexuality is, after all, God's idea, seeks to free us from lust as it does from gluttony and greed. It proclaims sexuality as proper to marriage with an openness to conceiving children as integral to marital relations.

Even married couples, however, are subject to the passions. And so refraining from marital relations has been a part of fasting, particularly before receiving the Eucharist or, in the case of married clergy, before celebrating the Liturgy. Clergy who will serve the Liturgy – and in some Churches whoever will receive the Eucharist – are expected to fast from sexual activity as well. Thus older editions of the Divine Liturgy begin with these words: "The priest who desires to celebrate the Divine Mysteries must ... be continent from the evening before, and be vigilant until the time of divine service."

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## **Tired of Fasting?**

In 1 Corinthians 6 St Paul evokes three basic principles of the Gospel which underpin any Christian ascetical effort. They are timely reminders for us of why we fast, or live the Christian life at all.

***The blood of Christ is the “price” of our redemption*** – “*For you were bought at a price*” (v. 20): The ultimate reason for any ascetical effort is the union we have with Christ in His saving death and resurrection. We live in the light of Christ’s death on the cross which freed us from the rule of sin and death. As the priest prays when beginning the prothesis at the Divine Liturgy, “You redeemed us from the curse of the Law by Your precious blood.”

***We are united as members of one body in Christ*** – “*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?*” (v. 15): When our bodies are immersed in the water of baptism we are organically united to Christ. We do not simply admire Him as an inspired teacher; in the Eucharist we are physically one with Him. Therefore our bodies have as important a role in worship as our hearts and minds. Like bows and prostrations, fasting is a form of physically glorifying God.

***We have received the Holy Spirit*** – Our baptism was sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit in chrismation, making us Spirit-bearers: “*Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?*” (v. 19). Our bodies are sanctified vessels set apart for the worship of God as much as any holy chalice.

***Worship God by the way you use your body*** – “*... therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s*” (v. 20): Our liturgical life includes a number of ways in which we glorify God in our bodies. Among the ways we can do so in our daily life are by striving to lessen the power which food and drink, sexuality or entertainment have over us by regularly fasting on Wednesday and Friday, recalling Christ’s betrayal and His passion, and during the Church’s fasting seasons, particularly the Great Fast.

**With St. Paul, we urge all to leave the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. We all are sinners in need of *metanoia* (repentance) in order to be rid of sin, the passions, and everything that enslaves us with regard to food and drink, clothing, pleasure, jealousy, anger, hatred, pride, obstinacy, calumny, amusements, and superficiality. He who commits sin is not free, but is the slave of sin. Great Lent is a time of purity, holiness, prayer, and liberation from sin, evil and corruption: a time very pleasing to God, a time of salvation, and a spiritual springtime preparing us to shine with the light of the glorious Resurrection. We exhort the faithful to take on the discipline of fasting and abstinence that our fathers and ancestors always practiced. My brothers and sisters, “repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!”**

*Bishop Nicholas Samra*

## Looking for the Way Home (Luke 15:11-32)

ON THE FIRST FEW SUNDAYS of the Triodion Psalm 137 is chanted before the Gospel at Orthros. Describing the plight of Jewish exiles in the seventh century BC, it begins with this verse: “*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion.*”

When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 597 BC they deported the defeated Jewish king along with nobles and important craftsmen to Babylon. In response to successive revolts the Babylonians destroyed the temple and deported even more people.

The forced exile ended in 538 BC after the fall of Babylon to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who gave the Jews permission to return to Judea and to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

This theme of exile comes to the fore today as the Church asks us to consider that we too are exiles, not from the Kingdom of Judah but from the Kingdom of God. The difference is that, while the deported Jews knew that they were exiles, we are largely unaware of it or unconcerned about it. We are doing reasonably well, our lives are satisfying and we are confident that things are getting better and better every day. But the Church holds up before us this image of exile so that we may realize that we are far from home, we are not where we are meant to be. This realization is the first step in the Lenten journey to find our way back to God.

### **We Are the Prodigal Son**

When the son in Christ’s parable took his inheritance, he went off to “a far country” to live the good life. He succeeded in doing so, as long as his money held out. Then things changed for the worse. At the end even the pigs ate better than he did. Only then did he realize how far he had fallen.

First, the Prodigal saw his situation for what it was. He came to realize that he was at the bottom and things couldn’t get much worse. Secondly he thought about the home he had forsaken. Finally he made the decision and acted upon it: “*I will arise and go to my father*” (Lk 15:18).

Like the deported Jews the Prodigal came to see himself as exiled. But while the Jews had been forcibly deported to Babylon and could not return home, the Prodigal had exiled himself from his true home. He was therefore able to pick himself up and embark on the journey back. He rightly saw his need to admit his wrongdoing and express his sorrow. “*I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants’*” (Lk 15: 18-19).

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Many people addicted to alcohol, drugs or other self-destructive behaviors come to the same realization when they bottom out. Their recovery process begins when they accept responsibility for their condition and seek to make amends. We may recognize the similarity of an addict to the Prodigal, but fail to see the comparison with ourselves.

All of us are far from home, perhaps not because of addiction but because of sin. The sin of Adam – seeking to live independently of God – is replicated in the lives of each of us in one way or another. Mankind wants the inheritance – all that we receive from God – but does not value a relationship with the Father. The difference is that while a recovering addict, like the Prodigal, has a clear sense of his addiction, we may be unaware of our loss because we have not hit bottom. We may not realize that being away from the Father’s house is in fact to be in exile.

### **Repentance: the Way Home**

During this pre-Fast period and during the Great Fast itself this hymn is sung at Sunday Orthros: “Open to me the doors of repentance, O Giver of life, for my soul comes early to Your Holy Temple, bearing the temple of my body all defiled; but since You are merciful, cleanse me in Your compassionate mercy.” What are these doors of repentance?

They are in fact the first steps indicated in the parable of the Prodigal and they constitute our program for this pre-fast period. We can begin with a realistic assessment of our life, our inventory, to use a popular term. What are the things we live for? Are they things of the earth or are they “*those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God*” as St Paul describes them (Col 3:1)? Do we give only lip service to the Scriptures, to the Eucharist, or to Christ’s poor or do they have a central place in our lives? We should take time to reflect on the signs of God’s love for us, the blessings of eternal life which we have received. Finally we should commit ourselves to action, to arise and go to the Father.

### **Our Welcoming Father**

In 1884 the French impressionist composer Claude Debussy published a cantata called *The Prodigal Son*. His work was loosely based on the Gospel parable, but Debussy did not include its real meaning in his composition. In his cantata the main character is neither the son nor his father, rather it is the mother, not mentioned in the Gospel at all. When the father learns that his son had returned, he does not welcome him although he kneels at the older man’s feet asking forgiveness. In Debussy’s version it is only in response to the pleadings of the boy’s mother that the father takes his son back.

While Debussy may have given us an accurate picture of a nineteenth century bourgeois French father, the Gospel is presenting a picture of God and it is very different. In Luke

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the father does not wait for his son to come and kneel before him; he runs to welcome the young man home even before he can say his little apology. When the older brother objects, the father runs out to him. He is more concerned with his son than with the son's hurtful actions. The Gospel portrait of the father shows us that repentant children have nothing to fear from their Father when they return to Him.

What about if we cannot carry out our good intentions to repent? If we forget our resolve, lose interest or fail? St Peter of Damascus offers this advice: "But if repentance is too much for you, and you sin out of habit even if you don't want to, show humility like the publican (Luke 18:13): this is enough to ensure your salvation."

Thus we return to the prayer of the publican which will accompany us throughout the Great Fast: "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." When we recognize our weakness and sinfulness, God recognizes the intentions of our heart. He is and always will be our loving Father.

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**Brethren, our purpose is to know the power of God's goodness: how when the Prodigal Son gave up sin and hastened to his father's house, his kindly father welcomed him and kissed him and marked him with signs of honor. He manifested his mystical joy to the inhabitants of Heaven by killing the fatted calf in order that we too may do what is right before the Sacrificer, the Father and the Lover of Mankind, and the Victim, the glorious Savior of our souls. (*stikheron at vespers*)**

**O Christ, open Your arms to me, and in Your great mercy accept me as I return from the distant country of sin and passion. (*Canon, Ode 3*)**

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## **Meatfare Sunday**

***1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2***

***Matthew 25: 31-46***

SAY GOOD-BYE TO MEAT. In the fasting practice common to all Byzantine Churches Meatfare Sunday is the last day on which meat would be eaten until Pascha. This is the first step towards the fuller discipline of the Great Fast when dairy products would not be eaten as well. This is why next Sunday is called Cheesefare Sunday (good-bye to dairy products).

Why is meat targeted in the Fast? Certainly in most places meat is a special festive dish. We think of the fatted calf which the father ordered slain to welcome his prodigal son back home. In some disciplines other festive items like wine and oil are avoided as well. As Christ said when pressed by the Pharisees about His disciples' behavior, "*Can the*

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*friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Mt 9:15).*

In many cultures to this very day meat is a luxury. Numerous people regularly get their protein from beans or pulses, not meat. It’s too expensive. One of the reasons why American fast food has become so popular throughout the world is that it makes meat affordable to more people than ever before.

There is another reason why we avoid meat on fast days. During the Lenten season we seek to focus on restoring the likeness to God within us, to stress the quality bestowed on us at the beginning and lost at the fall. During the Fast we seek to return to the Garden of Eden, as it were, to return to Paradise, and no one ate meat in the Garden.

According to the Book of Genesis, *“God said, ‘See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food’; and it was so” (Gen 1:29-30).* We were all vegetarians in Eden. By avoiding meat we are symbolizing our desire to return to Eden, to recover our nature as God meant it to be.

The Book of Genesis paints a picture of human history in a downward spiral to the time of Noah and the flood. According to Genesis, after that catastrophe, God began restoring humanity on the earth. Part of that restoration included the addition of meat to our diet. God said to Noah, *“Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as [I gave] the green herbs” (Gen 9:15).* Our fasting from meat, then, is not to avoid something bad but to express our desire for something better. In this kind of fasting we glorify God in the body by limiting ourselves to what has been called the “food of paradise.” In this way we are saying that we value above all things the communion with God that our first parents had.

As the Jewish people developed, the meat of certain animals, fish and other sea creatures was considered as “unclean,” unfit for God’s Chosen People. This served in part to stress their particular relationship to God and distinguish them from others. In the New Testament we see that this distinction is abolished; there would be no separation between Jews and Gentiles and no unclean foods. This is expressed in the Acts of the Apostles which records St. Peter’s vision of a sheet lowered from the heavens containing all kinds of animals. Peter was told to eat but he refuses on the ground that these animals were unclean. Then a voice from heaven told him, *“What God has cleansed you must not call common” (Gen 10:15).* Gentiles and all foods were acceptable to the Creator and were to be received by the followers of Christ.

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## **Food Offered to Idols (1 Corinthians 8:8 – 9:2)**

One of the issues facing the early Church was the question of food offered to idols, as described in the Epistles of St Paul. As the Church moved into Europe it encountered groups that observed religious meals in which food offered to deities, or even the spirits of the dead, was consumed.

Some believers were scandalized to see other Christians sharing in these meals. Paul begins his response to this question by saying, “*Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge*” (1 Cor 8:1) By this he meant that we know that this means nothing because idols are nothing: “*We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one*” (v.4). In essence, then, eating this food didn’t matter because all the idols in the world couldn’t make food anything other than God’s creation.

There was another side to the question which Paul finds even more important. Some new believers didn’t understand this principle and so were shocked to see other – presumably more mature – Christians eating food sacrificed to an idol as though the idol must be real after all. So Paul recasts the question: it’s not about eating food but about the effect on new believers. “*Knowledge puffs up,*” he writes, “*but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. ... for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled*” (v. 1-2,7). So don’t eat, not because of the idols, but because harming the faith of the weak is more unchristian than eating this food.

We hear this teaching today to remind us that our fasting is not about right and wrong food so much as it is about supporting the faith of our fellow believers. The Church’s fasting days and seasons are shared experiences, actions that we are meant to do together. There are times when a person may fast privately and this fasting should be done in secret. Fasting seasons, however, are common activities and if I denigrate them or excuse myself from them I am weakening the resolve of others. In addition I am missing out on an experience that will heighten the joy of Pascha, when the Bridegroom is with us again.

### **Food Offered to Idols Today?**

**Recently a group of Pentecostals in Australia mounted a campaign against Cadbury chocolates, claiming that the company was offering the candy to idols. Their “proof” was that packages were imprinted with the *Halal* insignia, evidence that the candy was offered to the “Muslim idol,” Allah! The insignia actually signified that there were no pork products in the candy (some cream fillings have gelatin stabilizers). As St Paul said, “... *if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know.*”**

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**We will may encounter groups in our multicultural societies today who offer food to idols. Hindus and hare Krishna devotees, for example, have the custom of *prasadam* (food “transformed into the grace of God,” as one writer expresses it). These would be vegetable offerings that are “acquired without pain and suffering on the part of any creature,” offered before an altar in a meditation rite, then mingled with other foods once the god or goddess has had a chance to partake.**

**Could you accept such food in the spirit of love with which it was offered without acknowledging the god or goddess to whom it was offered? What do you think St Paul would say?**

IN THE PAST ONE HUNDRED YEARS meat consumption in the U.S. has risen dramatically. We now consume over 270 pounds per person per year. In contrast a person in the countries of the former Roman Empire eats an average of from 167 (Greece), to 49 (Syria) pounds annually. What is a luxury in many parts of the world has become a necessity for many in our country.

In the Roman period many ordinary people ate most of the meat they consumed at religious banquets. In both Judaism and the pagan religions animals would be sacrificed to God (or a god) and the blood would be poured out as an offering to the divinity. Certain parts would be given to the priests and the rest returned to the person offering the sacrifice to be served in a banquet to friends and neighbors.

This created the dilemma for the first Christians which St. Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians. Should a believer eat the meat that his neighbor had offered to Jupiter or any pagan divinity? Would that be an acknowledgement that there were many gods and goddesses as the pagans claimed? Would they be “taking communion” with these gods?

St Paul presents two important principles in his response. First he affirms that the idols which the pagans worshipped were nothing, so the food offered to them was nothing special either. Christians would not sin by eating their fill. But there was a more important consideration: what would less informed believers think if they saw their leaders eating at these festivals? They may be led to think that the pagan gods are real and their faith in one God may be weakened. “*Therefore,*” Paul affirms, “*if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat again, lest I make my brother stumble*” (v.13).

### **Ordinary Christians vs. Gnostics**

This controversy exposed a divide in the early Church between those educated in classical philosophy and ordinary believers. The educated considered themselves to be “Gnostics,” those in the know, and sometimes looked down on the rest. St Paul had little sympathy for their attitudes and spoke with some derision, “*For if anyone sees you who ‘have knowledge’ eating in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?*” (v.10)

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St John Chrysostom spoke even more harshly: “Don’t tell me that such a man is only a shoemaker, another a dyer, another a brazier: but bear in mind that he is a believer and a brother. Whose disciples are we? - of fishermen, publicans and tent-makers! Are we not followers of Him who was brought up in the house of a carpenter; and who deigned to have the carpenter’s betrothed wife for a mother; and who was laid in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and who had nowhere to lay His head—of Him whose journeys were so long that His very journeying was enough to tire Him down; of Him who was supported by others?” (20<sup>th</sup> Homily on 1 Corinthians) Followers of an itinerant carpenter-preacher have no cause to look down on fellow believers because they do not know philosophy. By God’s grace they know Christ.

Not a few groups of early gnostic Christians ended by devising their own belief systems, often denying that God was the source of the material creation, something they were too “spiritual” to admit. One could rise above the material by acquiring *gnosis* (superior knowledge) not obvious to the ordinary man. They found their salvation, not in union with Christ but in the acquisition of gnosis. Groups of Gnostics could be found in the East until the rise of Islam.

St Paul’s response to the elitism of the Gnostic Christians was to urge them to put the welfare of the weaker brethren ahead of their own. Yes, Paul said in effect, it’s ok to eat food at pagan festivals but it’s not ok to scandalize brethren who don’t understand how this could be. And the reason for this is that we are all members of the one body of Christ: “*But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ*” (vs. 9-12).

St Paul would make this principle a cornerstone of his directions to the new churches he would organize. Not only should the intellectuals look out for the ordinary believer, those able to put their faith into practice should care for those who do not. As he told the Galatians, “*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself*” (Gal. 6 1-3). Not only the intellectual elite but the spiritually adept need an antidote to pride: caring for those less proficient than themselves rather than looking down upon them.

### **A Matter of Conscience**

St Paul characterizes those who may be scandalized at pagan banquets as having a “*weak conscience*” (v.9). In every man there is an understanding of right and wrong. Conscience has been described as “man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths” (Vatican Council II). Deep within himself man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. When a person does this he is said to be “following his conscience.”

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Christians should feel obliged to form their conscience in accordance with the word of God rather than the dictates of the culture in which they live or their personal sentiments. Developing such a Christian conscience is one aspect of the believer's interior life. A person who ignores self-reflection remains weak and susceptible to every changing fad. When faced with a moral dilemma he is unable to make his decision based on clear principles – biblical or otherwise – and usually just does what “everyone else” is doing. Like their first century forebears, they have a weak conscience.

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### **Food Offered to Idols Today?**

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### **The Son of Man Will Come (Matthew 25:31-46)**

“I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE; no one comes to the Father, except through me” (John 14:6). The incarnate Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the only one through whom we have access to God, to live the divine life in this world and in the age to come. Many Christians take this to mean that, unless one is explicitly a believer in Christ, he cannot be saved. What, then, of those who have never heard of Christ? What is to become of them?

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The Lord gives us the answer in His parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). Here, we are told, that when the Son of Man comes in his glory “*all the nations will be gathered before Him*” (v.32). “The nations” here translates the Greek term *ta ethnē*, which in the Scriptures generally refers to the Gentiles, those who are not Jews. Jesus’ hearers would know that those being judged here are the Gentiles, the mass of peoples who were not believers in the God of Israel.

The Lord’s teaching about true believers is recorded in Jn 5:24: “*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.*” Those who have put on Christ and live in communion with God through Him already share in the divine life. Those who maintain their union with Christ will continue in that life after death.

In Matthew’s parable Jesus is speaking about the judgment of nonbelievers. People are separated, some on the right and others on the left. Those on the right are described as righteous because they fed, clothed or welcomed Christ; those on the left are condemned because they did not. Neither group recognized Him, but those on the right simply did to the least what they thought was right. And for this they were proclaimed as “*blessed of my Father*” (v. 34).

In light of this parable the Church’s teaching has been that those who do not know Christ yet follow their conscience in doing good to their fellow-man are blessed. As the Fathers of Vatican II declared, “*For they who without their own fault do not know of the Gospel of Christ and His Church, but yet seek God with sincere heart, and try, under the influence of grace, to carry out His will in practice, known to them through the dictate of conscience, can attain eternal salvation*” (*Lumen gentium* #16).

People who seek to close heaven to nonbelievers often quote the risen Jesus’ words on sending forth the apostles: “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.*” (Mark 16:16). Those who hear the gospel preached to them have the opportunity to accept or reject it.

What about those who have rejected a distorted image of God, perhaps gained second-hand from a negative experience in the Church? Are they truly rejecting Christ? Today there are many baptized who have lost their faith. Some have even requested that their names be removed from the baptismal register, “the Book of Life” (Byzantine baptismal rite). Are they condemned?

Whatever their fate on the last day, it is not for us to condemn them! We may the reason they lost their faith! The anonymous author of the fifth-century Incomplete Commentary on Matthew writes, “*Just as someone who is wearing splendid clothing avoids every filthy object lest it by chance get dirty, so everyone who receives God in his heart and*

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*spirit ought to be careful so that he does not contaminate God, knowing that if God has been contaminated among us, He will remain uncontaminated in His own nature”* (Homily 14). The God rejected by many is one “contaminated” because of our actions. If anything we should pray for those who have rejected Christ as well as for those who have never known Him.

## **The Parable and Us**

If feeding the hungry is so important that it saves people who never knew Christ, what can it do for us? Among other things, it can help free us from the grip of materialism so prevalent in our consumer society today. We “must” have the latest, the fastest, the most attractive – otherwise we have somehow failed. If nothing else, feeding others takes us out of ourselves and connects us with others in a very basic way. And, according to the Gospel, it joins us to Christ Himself.

The life of Christians who take this parable seriously is very different from that of those who are in the thrall of greed. Recently a New Orleans couple was thinking of adopting a disabled newborn. They told a local reporter, that the “reasons against” column was the longer; the “reasons for” were shorter. But it was topped, Royanne said, by the scriptural injunction in Matthew 25: *“Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”*

Catherine Doherty, the late founder of the Madonna House communities was raised in Russia before the Communist takeover. She describes how this parable was lived in her home:

“My father was in the diplomatic service, so he entertained all the diplomatic corps at our home in Petrograd one evening. Big deal: tea and wonderful trays of cakes, and 250 people. Suddenly the butler opened the door and said, ‘Christ at the door, sir.’ Well, the French ambassador’s wife dropped her cup; she had never heard anything like that.

“My father and mother excused themselves from the 250 VIPs and walked into the next room. There they found a wino at the door. My father bowed low to him and opened the door. My mother set the table with the best linen and served him herself with my father’s help.”

Catherine herself was about nine at the time and recalls asking, “Mommy, can I serve the gentleman?” Her mother replied, No, you were disobedient last week; you can’t serve Christ when you are disobedient.”

“Now that’s my background,” Catherine wrote in her autobiography. “That’s how we were taught.”

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Acting in the spirit of this parable need not be so courageous. In his 57<sup>th</sup> homily on Matthew St John Chrysostom notes that we are not asked for much. *“Mark how easy are His injunctions. He did not say, ‘I was in prison, and you set me free; I was sick, and you raised me up again;’ but, ‘you visited me,’ and, ‘ye came unto me.’”* Making sandwiches for a homeless shelter or delivering meals to an elderly neighbor are not monumental or heroic actions, but they can number us among the blessed if done in the spirit of Christ.

Almsgiving along with prayer and fasting in a spirit of repentance are the mileposts on our Lenten journey to Pascha. The spirit in which we fulfill them shows us how close we are to living the life of Christ in our world... or how far.

**Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let this be our way of life: let us feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, visit those in prison and the sick. Then the Judge of the earth will say even to us: “Come, you whom My Father has blessed, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you!”**

*From the Midnight Service*

### **Cheesefare Sunday**

#### ***Romans 13: 11b-14:4***

WE ALL FEEL THAT WE WILL LIVE FOREVER. We know intellectually that this just isn't so, but still we rarely deal with the prospect of our life's end on an emotional level. Even people with terminal diagnoses, who know that they have only months or weeks before they die, still try to live as if they have a lifetime ahead of them. Friends and relatives conspire to keep the prospect of death at bay. They talk about the news, the weather, or what they saw on television – anything other than the approach of the “grim reaper.”

St Paul, on the other hand, pulls no punches, insisting that his readers face reality. *“It is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand”* (Rom 13:12). But while we might say the day of this life is over and the night of death is near, St Paul says the opposite. This life is night – eternal life is the true day. This life, with its cares and preoccupations, is burdensome. The end of this life promises salvation.

St John Chrysostom, commenting on this passage, says that St Paul “... puts the Resurrection close at hand. For as time advances, he means, the season of our present life is wasting away, and the life to come approaches. If then you are prepared, and have done all that He has commanded, that day is salvation for you; but if you are not ready, it is not so.” That is not some kind of threat for Chrysostom: “It is not to alarm them that he

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exhorts them in this way, but out of kindness, in order to untie them from their attachment to the things of this present world” (Homily on Romans).

Most of us are quite happy to be attached to the things of this present world and resist parting from them. It is not unusual to find older people, who have moved from a family home to smaller quarters, trying to cram all “their things” into one or two rooms. Few are those who come to realize that, as the saying goes, “what you own, owns you.” For St Paul, our “things” are not something to hold onto, but to leave behind happily, because what awaits us is so far superior.

In our lectionary the Epistle to the Romans is read during the first weeks after Pentecost. Why is this section appointed for this Sunday? – because “*the day is at hand.*” The Great Fast begins this evening with “Forgiveness Vespers.” We have the opportunity to be untied from “our attachment to the things of this present world,” to “*cast off the works of darkness, and ... put on the armor of light*” (v. 12), through the observances of the Fast.

The next section of this passage is equally appropriate to the Fast: “*Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another’s servant?*” (Rom 14:3, 4) We must be on guard lest our desire to keep the Fast with augmented prayer, fasting and almsgiving push us to judge the observance of others and thus render our observance barren. As always in the Church, our brethren should be more important than our devotions or other practices. After all, they are more important to God.

### **Fasting from Myself (Matthew 6:14-21)**

THE LAST SUNDAY BEFORE THE GREAT FAST has several descriptive names. It is called *the Sunday of the Expulsion*, remembering the sin of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden. It is also *Cheesefare Sunday*, the last day for eating dairy products. Finally it is the *Sunday of Forgiveness*. On this day we are expected to ask forgiveness from anyone we have offended. Perhaps it is a good idea to give this day yet another name, one which includes the meaning of the others. Let’s call it *Ego-fare Sunday*.

### **The Expulsion from Paradise**

The story of Adam and Eve – really the story of any sin – is about ego. In Genesis we read that God said, “...if you eat of it [the tree] you will surely die.” But Eve said, “Gee, it looks good. I’d like to see for myself.” And we know the rest.

Sin is about ego: someone (Eve or me) decides that they will ignore someone else (God or my spouse) and do what I want. I prefer my will to the will of another, to God’s word in the Scriptures or to the Tradition of the Church. And so the remembrance of the

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original sin on this Sunday is a call for us to see that our ego is at the heart of our own sins and to resolve to hold it in check. This struggle is at the heart of any profitable Fast.

### **Fasting with the Mind of the Church**

Cheesefare Sunday is traditionally the last day for eating dairy products until Pascha, as the Great Fast begins tomorrow. This poses a problem in our society where meat and dairy are the substance of every meal. Some people say that they cannot do without meat and so they only fast sporadically. By this they may mean they need protein and are not aware of other sources of protein, such as beans, peas, soy products (tofu), as well as seeds and nuts. But it is perhaps more likely that people miss the taste of meat, fish or dairy products more than their protein content.

As a result many people replace these foods, not with vegetables and grains, but with meat and dairy substitutes made to taste like meat and dairy products. Technically these foods are not meat or dairy – they only taste like them – so they don't break the Fast. Or do they?

Christian fasting is not based on an avoidance of any foods because they are unclean or taboo in any way. Neither do we abstain from meat or dairy during the Fast for health reasons, out of respect for the creatures that produce them or for environmental concerns, legitimate as they may be. We do not even fast during this season to lament Christ's suffering and death. As St John Chrysostom wrote, "The Passion is not a reason for fasting or mourning but one for joy and exultation" (Sixteenth Homily on Matthew).

Fasting in the Eastern Churches is a tool for retraining the ego. It is a way of curbing the "I crave" in each of us and doing it together as a community. Fasting is a type of self-denial, an imitation of Christ's own emptying Himself in order to share our human condition. The liturgy expresses this poetically: "The flower of abstinence grows for the entire world from the tree of the Cross. Let us then accept the Fast with love and take pleasure in the fruit of Christ's divine commandments" (Orthros, First Wednesday of the Fast). The self-emptying of the cross bears fruit in us when we strive to empty ourselves through fasting.

While we strive to control our greed, lust or pride, ego does not take a break. Fasting (and actually any Church practice) can become focused on my will. One example is what we fast from. Before children are old enough to actually fast, they are often encouraged to "give something up for Lent," to decide what they want to do in observance of this season. Unfortunately many people don't progress beyond this age spiritually. They still try to decide what *they* want to do. Ego again!

When we fast we are called to follow the Church's way of fasting, not to decide for ourselves how or when to fast. We fast, for example on most Wednesdays and Fridays, not Tuesdays and Thursdays. We may need to lessen the amount of fasting because of our health or the rigors of our work, but we should be wary of letting what we want to do turn

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our fasting into an ego trip. We may feel the need of more protein than some fasting foods provide while conveniently forgetting that some pulses (e.g. lentils) contain more protein than some meats. This is why making any changes in the traditional practice should be done with the blessing of one's spiritual father who can help us distinguish a real need from the promptings of our ego.

People with real health issues will always receive a blessing to eat meat or dairy during the Fast but for most people, their reluctance to avoid these foods – and for forty days, at that – is because they don't want to give up the taste. If we look to the Fast in the way that the Church does, as an exercise in curbing our ego, we may well decide to avoid meat and dairy “look-alikes” as well.

### **Taking Pride in Fasting**

Another way fasting can become an ego trip for the unwary is the way we take pride in it, be it our personal fasting or that of our Church. “We don't fast just one day – our 40 days is 40 days!” As Christ indicated in Mt 6:16-18, there are always people who fast with fanfare – another manifestation of the ego. This is something we must be on our guard against as it is so easy to fall into this trap. If you are having lunch with friends or colleagues avoid saying things like, “I can't eat that, I'M FASTING!” It would be more in the spirit of a true Fast to say something like, “I'll just have a salad, I've been watching my diet lately.” This is a verbal way of anointing one's head and washing one's face, to use Christ's imagery, lest we appear to be broadcasting our fast to one and all.

As we prepare to intensify our fasting during this season, let us examine the spirit in which we fast. Let us begin the Fast with this understanding: not measuring our fasting by what we eat and how much, but of the effect it has on us, whether our fasting makes us free or whether we become slaves of fasting itself.

The Great Fast is a time to struggle with our ego, our self-centered self-love. Our fasting is truly effective in this regard when we pay less attention to ourselves, to our wants to our needs and increase our love for others. Find someone who is hungry for food and feed them, or someone who is spiritually hungry and nourish help them. To do that, we must be able to see and pay attention to the needs of another. And we can't do that if we are constantly focused on ourselves.

It is easier to observe the Church's fasting rules, attend its additional services, and contribute to its charitable programs in a formal way without struggling against our ego. To do so empties our Fast of any worthwhile result as the following hymn from the Triodion indicates: *In vain do you rejoice in not eating, O my soul! For you abstain from food, but from passions you are not purified. If you persevere in sin, you will perform a useless fast.*

### **Fasting and Compassion**

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The teaching on fasting in the Sermon on the Mount, read at today's Liturgy, concludes with the admonition, "*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal*" (Mt 6:19). Fasting is a school in which we try to live by this precept. In our affluent society most of us have some "treasures on earth" which we are reluctant to give up. Fasting helps us learn that we can in fact live without some of the things on which we base our way of life.

In the Gospel Christ admonishes us to avoid making a show of our fasting. In ancient Israel people often manifested their sorrow or repentance by tearing their garments or wearing sackcloth and smearing their faces with ashes. Christ taught the opposite: "*But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting*" (Mt 6:17-18).

The Church encourages us to do the same, and specifies the ointment we should use: "Let us anoint the head of our soul with the oil of loving compassion" (Canon, First Monday of the Fast). In Greek the words for *oil* and *mercy* are virtually identical, giving rise to the idea that the joy of the season is to be found in extending compassion to the needy. "When you give, give generously, your face lit up with joy. And give more than you were asked for..." (Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetic Treatises*, 23).

The frequency of Lenten charity suppers or alms boxes in our churches are expressions of this sentiment.

Compassion has been defined as "the deep awareness of the suffering of others coupled with the desire to relieve it." It is much more personal than writing a check or dropping off a donation to the local thrift store. Compassion is what motivates the coming of Christ in the flesh. "If He came down to earth, it was out of compassion for the human race. He suffered our sufferings before suffering the cross, even before taking our flesh. If He had not suffered, He would not have come down to share our life with us" (Origen, *Sixth Homily on Ezekiel* 6,6). Imitating the compassion of Christ, then, means becoming personally involved with those you seek to help, even to the extent of sharing their condition. For most of us, learning to do so might take a lifetime of Lents.

It has long been the custom to speak of the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, ways of showing compassion that are within the reach of every believer. They are:

*Corporal (physical) Works of Mercy:*

- Feeding the hungry
- Giving drink to the thirsty
- Sheltering the homeless
- Clothing the naked
- Visiting the sick
- Visiting the imprisoned

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Burying the dead

*Spiritual Works of Mercy:*

Admonishing the sinner

Instructing the ignorant

Counseling the unsettled

Comforting the sorrowful

Bearing wrongs patiently

Forgiving all injuries, and

Praying for the living and the dead.

Can at least one of these form part of your exercise of the Great Fast?

### **St Theodore the Studite on Fasting**

**“Fasting then is a renewal of the soul, for the holy Apostle says, *Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward is being renewed day by day.* And if it is being renewed, clearly it is being made beautiful according to its original beauty; made beautiful in itself it is being drawn lovingly to the one who said, *I and the Father will come and make our dwelling with him.* If then such is the grace of fasting, that it makes us into a dwelling place of God, we must welcome it, brethren, gladly, not grieving at the plainness of the diet, for we know that the Lord, though he is able to nourish lavishly, made a banquet for thousands in the wilderness from bread and water. Also because what is unusual, with enthusiasm becomes acceptable and painless. Fasting is not defined by foods alone, but by every abstinence from evil, as our godly fathers have explained.**

**“And so, I beg you, let us abstain from despondency, idleness, sluggishness, jealousy, strife, maliciousness, self-indulgence, self-reliance; let us abstain from destructive desire which the many-shaped serpent lays before us when we are fasting. Let us listen to the one who says, ‘The fruit which slew me was beautiful to behold and fair to eat’. ..This is what our forefather Adam suffered when he was tricked by the serpent; for when he touched the forbidden food, he found death instead of life.” *(Catechesis 54)***

### **FORGIVENESS VESPERS**

A GREAT WAY TO DEAL WITH OUR EGO is to ask forgiveness of others before we presume to begin the Fast. In the rite of forgiveness at the first service of the Great Fast, Sunday evening vespers, everyone in the church asks forgiveness of everyone else. The lesson is

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clear: even if I'm not conscious of having offended you, I want to clear up any thing I may have done, even in ignorance.

Some people balk at this rite, feeling that they really haven't done anything that needs to be forgiven (that ego again). After all, no one is mad at me. Father Alexander Schmemmann often pointed out that the rite of forgiveness is so important precisely because it makes us acknowledge – be it only for one minute – that our entire relationship to others is inadequate. As Adam and Eve hid from God in the Garden, so we hide from one another, routinely erecting a wall around ourselves, avoiding any real concern for other people. We make sure that we are polite and “friendly” to others, while we are actually indifferent to them, unconcerned with their real needs.

Another secret way by which we offend others is by judging them in our hearts. In words that seem particularly modern, St Macarios the Great writes, *“Christians ought not to pass judgment of any kind on anyone, not on the prostitute nor on sinners nor on disorderly persons. But they should look on all persons with a single mind and a pure eye so that it may be for such a person almost a natural and fixed attitude never to despise or judge or abhor anyone or to divide people and place them into boxes”* (Homilies 5.8). We know that, as we look around the church, we constantly pigeonhole people. “She’s always talking about her ailments... he’s always bragging about his latest acquisition.” We need to confess our judgmental attitudes to acquire the “pure eye” of the true Christian.

So it does not matter whether we have publicly failed that person directly when asking for forgiveness, because whenever we fail to follow the Gospel, we become less than we can be and inevitably affect each other. This is why we need to ask forgiveness of all people on this day.

Sad to say, there are sincere believers who come to confession because they feel it is easier to repent before God than it is to apologize to people they have hurt! After all, God always forgives and the priest doesn't try to make you feel embarrassed.

On the contrary, a sincerely repentant encounter with Christ, whether in confession or in the Eucharist, assumes that penitents have already repented to those whom they have offended. There is no greater sign of the authenticity of a person's repentance than the willingness to do something concrete about it. Similarly there is no greater sign that a “penitent” is deceiving himself when he tries to apologize to God while avoiding the person he offended.

Back in the 1970s teenager Michael Goodman mugged another youth, Claude Soffel, on a New York City street and stole his bus pass. Memory of the incident never left Goodman's conscience. Thirty-five years later he recognized his victim's name on a Facebook posting and expressed his repentance online.

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“You may not remember this (about 1976 or '77),” Goodman wrote, “but a long, long time ago... trying to look like a tough guy... I walked up to you and mugged you for your bus pass. I have never forgotten the incident or your name. Finally I can say I'm very sorry.”

Some time later the victim, Mr Soffel, replied: “Clearly you're a bigger man today. I recognize your name now as well. So, apology accepted. So let us now, jointly put this in its proper place, behind us.”

We do not know whether either of these men are believers, but since their story went viral they have become role models for repentance and forgiveness in the cyber world.

### **Repenting in Our Liturgy**

Repenting to one another has an important place in our liturgical tradition, based on the injunction of Christ that wrongs should be righted before coming to worship God: *“Therefore if you are bringing your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift”* (Mt 5:24).

In the Divine Liturgy, having brought our gift before the altar, we are reminded, “Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess the Father, the Son...” At this point the greeting of peace would be exchanged: priests with priests, deacons with deacons and laypeople with one another. These days, the greeting is generally exchanged only among the clergy. In some churches you may still see people moving without ostentation through the congregation, asking forgiveness before approaching the holy mysteries! In other churches the greeting “Christ is in our midst – He is and ever shall be!” is exchanged without any accompanying gesture.

A moving response to Christ’s injunction is observed as we begin the Great Fast every year. The first service of the season climaxes with the rite of forgiveness. People approach the priest one at a time and each asks the other’s forgiveness for any way they may have offended each other during the year. The worshippers then ask one another’s forgiveness, forming a large a circle around the church until all the members have expressed their repentance to one another. Not surprisingly, this service has come to be known as “Forgiveness Vespers.”

### **Repentance Calls for Forgiveness**

As difficult as directly expressing our repentance might be, extending forgiveness to others may be even more demanding for even committed church members. Offenses, whether real or imagined, can prey on one’s mind for years; grudges nursed for decades. Yet the words of Christ in the Gospel could not be clearer, *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (Mt 6:14, 15).

“Yes,” you may say, “but you don’t know what she did to me!” Other people’s sins may seem unforgivable, but once we take a step toward forgiving them, well who knows what might happen.

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In 1944, the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko's mother took him from Siberia to Moscow. They were among those who witnessed a procession of twenty-thousand German war prisoners marched through the streets of Moscow:

“The pavements swarmed with onlookers, cordoned off by soldiers and police. The crowd was mostly women – Russian women with hands roughened by hard work, lips untouched by lipstick, and with thin hunched shoulders which had borne half of the burden of the war. Every one of them must have had a father or a husband, a brother or a son killed by the Germans. They gazed with hatred in the direction from which the column was to appear.

“At last we saw it. The generals marched at the head, massive chins stuck out, lips folded disdainfully, their whole demeanor meant to show superiority over their plebian victors.

“‘They smell of perfume, the bastards,’ someone in the crowd said with hatred. The women were clenching their fists. The soldiers and policemen had all they could do to hold them back.

“All at once something happened to them. They saw German soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty blood-stained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down. The street became dead silent -- the only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches.

“Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman's shoulder, saying, ‘Let me through.’ There must have been something about her that made him step aside. She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a colored handkerchief and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now from every side women were running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people.”

*A Precocious Autobiography*, Yevgeny Yevtushenko (Collins, London)

Let us enter the season of the radiant Fast with joy, giving ourselves to the spiritual combat. Let us purify our spirit and cleanse our flesh. As we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit, may we persevere with love, so as to be worthy to see the solemn Passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness to behold His holy Resurrection.

O Lord, the light of Your grace has risen and shines upon our souls. Behold, now is the acceptable time: the season of repentance is here. Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, so that we may pass through the Great Fast as through a great sea, and reach the goal of the third-day Resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord and the Savior of our souls!

*Stichera from Forgiveness Vespers*

## **First Saturday of the Great Fast - St Theodore and the Boiled Wheat**

*Hebrews 1: 1-12 – Mark 2:23-3:3*

The last non-Christian ruler of the Roman Empire, Julian the Apostate (361-363) sought to revive the ancient glory of Rome by restoring its ancient pagan religion at the expense of Christianity. During the first week of the Great Fast, when many people were not eating for much of the week, Julian ordered the Prefect of Constantinople to sprinkle all the food in the marketplaces with the blood from sacrifices offered to idols. People would have to eat this food on the weekend and thus, he reasoned, honor the gods that he worshipped. Seemingly Julian had not read 1 Corinthians.

In any case, St Theodore the Recruit, martyred some 50 years before, appeared in a dream to Archbishop Eudoxius, ordering him to inform all the Christians that no one should buy anything at the marketplaces, but rather to eat cooked wheat with honey (kolyva) instead. Eating Julian's doctored foods would suggest to people that his idols were real. The faithful ate kolyva instead; there would be no return to paganism.

Since the time of Patriarch Nectarios (381-397) the Byzantine Churches have remembered this event on the first Saturday in the Great Fast. The Canon to St Theodore is sung, then kolyva is blessed in memory of St. Theodore's intervention.

## **First Sunday of the Great Fast – Sunday of Orthodoxy**

*Hebrews 11:24-26, 32-40; 12:1-2a*

*John 1:43-51*

**“You Will See Angels” (John 1:43-51)**

WE ARE ALL FAMILIAR WITH THE IMAGE of the eight-ounce glass containing four ounces of liquid. Is it half full or half empty? The way we see it reveals more about the viewers than about the glass.

The Church numbers the Sundays during the Great Fast in successive order. Thus today is the First Sunday, next week will mark the Second Sunday and so on. For many people the Fast is an endurance test and so this numbering may suggest something like, “Oh God, only one week is over. There's another five weeks to go!” A more positive way of looking at things might number the Sundays in count-down fashion: Sixth Sunday before Pascha...Fifth... Fourth... it's getting closer... we're almost there!

This system may be more in keeping with the vision expressed in the Scriptures read at this Sunday's Liturgy. Scholars tell us that this selection comes to us from the days when catechumens were intensifying their preparation for baptism at Pascha. The readings

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suggest promise, blessing and the joy of being part of God's plan at its most critical moment.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, read every Saturday and Sunday during the Fast, is addressed to Jewish believers in Christ. It includes a number of references to Jewish history and practice, some recorded in the Old Testament and others taken from Jewish tradition. The passage read today, from chapter 11, is actually the conclusion of a longer praise of Old Testament notables renowned for their faith, from Abel onward. It is faith that sanctified all these elders in Jewish history because "...without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb 11:6). Catechumens, who would be asked to profess their faith during this season, are thus reminded to place their trust in the Person of God and in the wisdom of His divine plan for mankind.

The punch line of this chapter, however, is its last verse. Despite their faith, the heroes and heroines of the Old Testament "... did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not have been made perfect apart from us." The entire course of God's providential care for the Jewish peoples is depicted as a kind of preparation for something more. That "something better" is, of course, the life in Christ which the catechumens will receive at baptism and the assurance of eternal life which we all will receive as witnesses to the resurrection of Christ.

### **The Promise to Nathaniel**

While the Gospel according to St. Mark is read at all other Liturgies during the Fast today the Church turns to the Gospel of John. We hear in detail of the Lord's first encounter with this future disciple, but again the purpose of reading it today is in the punch line, the last verse of the passage: "*Most assuredly I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man*" (Jn 1:51). Again we have the promise of "something better" to be fulfilled in the future.

A number of Fathers including St John Chrysostom said that the descending and ascending of the angels promised here was fulfilled in the Paschal mystery. As the Blessed Theophylact, eleventh-century Archbishop of Ochrid in Bulgaria, emphasized in his Explanation of the Gospel of St. John "*All these things did, in fact, take place at His Crucifixion and Ascension. As the time of His Passion approached, an angel from heaven strengthened Him; at His Tomb there was an angel, and again at His Ascension, as Luke relates.*"

Whether we are catechumens preparing for baptism or faithful preparing for Pascha, we are told today that, with faith, we will see the inauguration of the new age, the fulfillment of all promises, and the manifestation of the Kingdom, in Christ.

Catechumens will be joined to the company of the saints when they will be enlightened, taste the heavenly gift and be partakers of the Holy Spirit (see Heb 6:4). All of us will see

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heaven opened in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the empty tomb and on Mount Olivet as we enter into the celebration of Pascha. And finally we will hear another promise from the angels at Christ's Ascension: "*This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven*" (Acts 1:11). Those forty days don't seem so long now, do they?

### **Catechumens in the Church Today**

In the early centuries of the Church in the Mediterranean world the catechumens received at Pascha were adults. During the persecutions they were people who had been attracted by the unwavering faith of the martyrs. After the persecutions were ended it was often the recognition by the state that gave people the impetus they needed to join the Church. When the Church was firmly established as the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, the baptism of infants began to outnumber the baptism of adults.

The Byzantine Liturgy retains a number of features from the period of the adult catechumenate. At every Divine Liturgy and every Presanctified Liturgy there are the prayers for and the dismissal of catechumens. In some local Churches these prayers are a part of every Liturgy; in others they are omitted unless there are actual catechumens present. In addition, during the last weeks of the Great Fast, prayers for those preparing for baptism at Pascha are added.

In fact there has never been a time when there have not been catechumens in one or another of the Byzantine Churches. The expansion of Eastern Christianity into the Balkans and the Slav lands brought whole new peoples to the font. In the second millennium the eastward expansion of the Russian Church into Asia and ultimately Alaska did the same. More recently the Christian Churches in Africa – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – have grown enormously. With the end of Communism, as with the end of the Roman persecutions, many came forward for baptism in those nations as well.

In our country the presence of catechumens in a parish is a kind of litmus test about the life of the parish. Are there catechumens or not? Are the only catechumens we receive those who will marry into one of the parish families? If there are no catechumens is it because our parish is more club than church? Are we content with the absence of catechumens – and the absence of vocations – in the parish as long as things are done our way? If so our celebration of Pascha will be missing something critical. The catechumens – and perhaps the angels – will have gone elsewhere.

The mystery of our salvation was once announced by the divinely-inspired prophets. They foretold this illumination for us who have arrived at the last days. By it, we receive knowledge of God, the one God and Lord, glorified in Three Persons; and we serve Him alone. Having one faith and one baptism, we have put on Christ. Wherefore, we confess our salvation in word and in deed, and we restore our likeness to God.

Sticheron at Vespers

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## **Why Are Icons Orthodox? (Sunday of Orthodoxy)**

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN THE GREAT FAST is also the Sunday of Orthodoxy, which celebrates the restoration of the Orthodox use of icons in the Byzantine Empire. But what exactly is “Orthodoxy” and what does it have to do with icons?

Literally the word means “rightly proclaiming” – those who glorify God in the correct manner. The oldest use of this term in the Christian East is in reference to understanding the Trinity as expressed in the Nicene Creed. If you could not profess this creed, then you were not Orthodox. Thus the sixth century Code of Justinian, the compilation of laws in the empire, decreed: “We direct that all Catholic Churches, throughout the entire world, shall be placed under the control of the Orthodox bishops who have embraced the Nicene Creed.”

Since then the Eastern Churches in the Roman Empire and their offshoots have called themselves Orthodox. There are two major groups of Orthodox Churches: those of the Byzantine tradition, called in English “Eastern Orthodox” and those of the Syriac and Coptic traditions, called “Oriental Orthodox.” The Armenian Church, considered one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, does not generally use the term, as Armenia was not part of the Byzantine Empire.

It was only after the separation of the Greek and Latin Churches in the Middle Ages that the term “Catholic” became more identified with the Western Church and “Orthodox” with the Eastern Churches. To this day, of course, Orthodox use the term “Catholic” and vice versa. Most Greek Catholics continue to use the term “Orthodox” when it appears in their liturgical texts, as well.

### **Orthodoxy and Icons**

As the controversy over icons developed in the Byzantine Empire, many saw the use of icons as a necessary consequence of the Incarnation of Christ as expressed in the Nicene Creed. If the Word of God truly took flesh, He could be depicted in images. As St John of Damascus wrote, “In the old days, the incorporeal and infinite God was never depicted. Now, however, when God has been seen clothed in flesh and talking with mortals, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter which works my salvation.”

Since the Church saw icons as connected with its faith in the Incarnation, it came to see icons as an expression of the Orthodox faith. Thus the definitive restoration of icons in

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Constantinople on the first Sunday of the Great Fast in the year 842 was called the “Triumph of Orthodoxy.”

### **The Synodikon of Orthodoxy**

During the Great Doxology at Orthros a procession is formed of many people carrying icons. When the procession comes to a halt the typikon prescribes the chanting of a document called the “Synodikon of Orthodoxy.” Although there are many local variants of this text, they all begin as follows:

“Let us Orthodox people, now celebrating this Day of Orthodoxy, especially glorify God, the Author of all goodness! Blessed is He forever. This is our God, who acquired and established His beloved heritage, the Holy Church, the foundations of which He laid even in Paradise, thereby comforting by His infallible Word, our forefathers who had fallen through disobedience. This is our God who, directing us to His saving promise, left not Himself without a witness, but first foretold the future salvation through the forefathers and prophets, and by manifold means gave lively descriptions of it. This is our God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in antiquity to the fathers by the prophets, and in these latter days spoke to us by His Son, with whom also He created the ages: who declared His goodwill toward us, disclosed the heavenly mysteries, assured us the truth of the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit; who sent His apostles to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to all the world, and confirmed it by various powers and miracles. Following this salutary revelation, and holding this Gospel, we believe...” And the people proclaim the Nicene Creed.

After the Creed the Synodikon continues: “As the prophets beheld, as the Apostles have taught... as the Church has received ... as the teachers have dogmatized... as the Universe has agreed... as Grace has shown forth... as Truth has revealed... as falsehood has been dissolved... as Wisdom has presented... as Christ awarded... thus we declare... thus we assert... thus we preach Christ our true God, and honor as Saints in words, in writings, in thoughts, in sacrifices, in churches, in Holy Icons; on the one hand worshiping and reverencing Christ as God and Lord; and on the other hand honoring them as true servants of the same Lord of all and accordingly offering them veneration.”

And the People respond in a loud voice: “This is the Faith of the Apostles, this is the Faith of the Fathers, this is the Faith of the Orthodox, this is the Faith which has established the Universe.”

The Synodikon concludes with the proclamation of *Many Years* to the living defenders of Orthodoxy, *Memory Eternal* to the departed and *Anathema* to those who deny the faith just proclaimed.

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When we venerate icons, then, we point in a concrete if wordless way to the truth of Christ's Incarnation. He took on our nature completely and transfigured it completely, including our material side, which we honor in this material way. Icons of the saints point to the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Giver of life, in the Church which transformed them as well. Icons, therefore, profess without words what we proclaim verbally in the Creed.

### **An Ancient Synodikon**

*The following Anathemas are taken from an 1111 edition of the Synodikon by a monk of the Monastery of Oleni in Moroea. They show how Orthodox Christians of that age identified icons with faith in Christ's Incarnation.*

“On every innovation and action contrary to the tradition of the Church, and the teaching and pattern of the holy and celebrated Fathers, or anything that shall be done after this: Anathema! . . .

On those who accept with their reason the incarnate economy of God the Word, but will not allow that this can be beheld through images, and therefore affect to receive our salvation in words, but deny it in reality: Anathema!

Those who apply the sayings of the divine Scripture that are directed against idols to the august icons of Christ our God and his saints: Anathema!

Those who share the opinion of those who mock and dishonor the august icons: Anathema!

Those who say that Christians treat the icons like gods: Anathema!

Those who dare to say that the Catholic Church has accepted idols, thus over-throwing the whole mystery and mocking the faith of Christians: Anathema!”

### **Second Sunday of the Great Fast St Gregory Palamas, Veneration of the Holy Relics**

*Hebrews 1:10-2:3 – Mark 2:1-12*

#### **An Angel or the Lord Himself? (Hebrews 1:10-2:3)**

WHAT IS AN ANGEL? – This seems to be a straightforward question that calls for a simple answer. There is no such “simple answer,” as the puzzling discussion in Hebrews 3 indicates. To unravel this passage we need to start with the concept of “angel” in the Old Testament.

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Basically, the term angel in Scripture means “messenger” and is often used to refer to a human messenger. It is also used to mean a heavenly messenger an “angel of God” or “angel of the Lord.” But then things get confusing because sometimes the angel of God speaks in the name of God or is identified with God. Jacob, for example, dreams of an Angel of God who says “I am the God of Bethel:”

*“Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, ‘Jacob.’ And I said, ‘Here I am.’ And He said, ‘Lift your eyes now and see, all the rams which leap on the flocks are streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me” (Gen 31:11-13).*

Is the speaker an angel or is it God Himself?

The incident called “the hospitality of Abraham” in our tradition is probably the best known example of God identified with His messengers. *“Then the LORD appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, ‘My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant” (Gen 13:1-3).* The trio remains and dines at Abraham’s table. Then the narrative continues, *“And the LORD said to Abraham...” (v. 13).*

Was the LORD one of the visitors? In Byzantine iconography the three visitors are depicted as angels and understood as representing in type the Holy Trinity.

### **Is Jesus an Angel?**

In the first days of the Church speculation about the nature of Christ abounded. Some thought of Christ as an angel of God, others, influenced by Greek philosophy, described Him as a “Demi-urge,” a kind of secondary god, an emanation from the Supreme God. In this system, the Demi-urge was responsible for the material creation.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, however, was written late in the first century AD. The inspired author was striving to show that the Lord Jesus was not a Demi-urge or other immaterial being but the true Son of the Father. Since he was writing to Jews, his appeal was naturally to the Old Testament. From the very first verse he tries to show that the Lord Jesus was unlike any other being known to Israel:

*“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds...” (v. 1, 2).*

Then, since the speculation about angels described above was current among his readers, he sets out to contrast what Christians believe about Jesus to what the Scriptures say

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about angels, first quoting Psalm 2: “*For to which of the angels did He ever say: ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten You’*”? then citing 2 Sam 7:14: “*And again: ‘I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son’*”? He marshals Deut 32:43 and verses from the Psalms – 45, 97, 104 and the two quoted in our passage (102 and 110) – to witness that the Son is greater than any of the angels.

### **If Not an Angel?**

In the Gospel we see the Lord described in Greek philosophical terms, purified from any talk of Supreme God and a secondary god: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was 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...* (Jn 1:1, 14).

St John adds another note which demanded explanation: “*No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him*” (Jn 1:18). How could he say that no one has ever seen God when the Scriptures say that Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah and others did just that? If they did not see God, whom did they see?

The Church understood John 1:18 to mean that, if “*No one has seen God at any time,*” then the appearances of the LORD in the Old Testament were manifestations of “*the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father.*” While we are accustomed to speak of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, among early Christians the term God was generally reserved for the Father. They were more likely to speak of God (i.e. the Father), the Son or Word of God and the Spirit of God. Thus they understood that the LORD, who appeared to Abraham and the rest, was not the Father but the Word of God who, in God’s own time, became man as Jesus of Nazareth.

### **Who Can Forgive Sins? (Mark 2:1-12)**

THERE ARE MANY DESCRIPTIVE TITLES ascribed to Christ in Scripture and the Tradition of the ancient Churches. He is portrayed as the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd, the Great High Priest, the Bread of life and so much more. Perhaps the most frequently heard of these depictions in Byzantine churches is the one which ends most liturgical services: “He is gracious and the Lover of mankind.”

Possibly the most important characteristic in Christ’s love for mankind is portrayed in St Mark’s description of the healing of the paralytic (Mk 2:1-12). He assures the sick man, “*Son, your sins are forgiven you*” (v. 5). The reaction of the scribes was unspoken but clear: “*Why does this man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” (v. 7).

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Feeding the hungry, helping the downtrodden are acts of love which anyone can perform, believer or unbeliever. God, however, has the monopoly on forgiving sins! That Christ proclaims the forgiveness of sins seems to equate Him with God, which the Jewish leaders saw as blasphemy.

Not only does Christ proclaim the forgiveness of sin: He does so by His word alone! In Jewish practice one had to submit to some sort of ritual in order to convey the need to be cleansed of sin. Before the temple at Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, the Jews had a complex system of sacrifices expressing repentance and atonement for anything which they saw as rendering them unfit to stand in worship before the Lord. Depending on their status or ability, people would offer unblemished animals or birds to be killed and burned upon the altar, at least in part, their blood sprinkled before the holy place as a plea for mercy. On the annual Day of Atonement a bull and a goat would be sacrificed by the High Priest for his sins and the offences of the entire nation.

John the Forerunner also practiced a rite to express repentance. As he described it, “*I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance*” (Mt 3:11). Christ stands in stark contrast to the priests and prophets of Israel: by His word alone He forgives sin. Nothing is needed other than faith in Him!

### **With His Own Blood**

The forgiveness which Christ accorded to the paralytic, to the sinful woman who wept at His feet (see Lk 7:36-50) and to others during His earthly ministry is made available to the whole world by His death and resurrection. Throughout the New Testament we see the imagery of the temple sacrifices used to explain Christ as the One who forgives. St John the Forerunner proclaims Him to his own followers as “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn 1:29). St Paul calls Christ’s death “*propitiation by His blood*” (Rom 3:25). “*We were reconciled to God through the death of His Son,*” Paul teaches (Rom 5:10). God, Paul tells us, “*... made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*” (2 Cor 5:21).

The most developed expression of Christ as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. There, after a lengthy description of the temple and its priesthood, we read, “*Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having attained eternal redemption*” (Heb 9:11-12). He is both the High Priest and the sacrifice who, once for all, restores mankind as fitting priests of God on earth.

### **Forgiveness in the Body of Christ**

When the disciples marveled at the healings and miracles wrought by Christ during His earthly ministry, He promised them, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go*

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to My Father” (Jn 14:12). Among other things, Christ has empowered the Church as His Body to continue proclaiming the remission of sins in His name. This ministry is exercised in a number of expressions by which we can experience God’s forgiveness in our life. To the degree that we enter into them we will find our lives centering on God to a greater degree. In our Tradition the following are emphasized:

**Daily Prayer for Repentance, particularly the Jesus Prayer** – The morning and evening prayers prescribed by the Church include prayers of repentance. The most basic of these is the Jesus Prayer: “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.*” God surely hears these prayers when offered from a contrite heart.

**Regular Self-Reflection** – Periodic, even daily, self-examination helps us to see the direction of our lives. Our entire existence should be lived in the light of the Holy Spirit. Honest self-examination helps us see the degree in which our lives are conformed to Christ’s.

**A Relationship with a Confessor/Spiritual Father** – Each person is in a different place in his or her journey. We may on occasion find thoughts in the Scriptures or the Fathers that touch our hearts but finding someone who knows you and knows the ways of Holy Tradition is like taking a giant step in the Christian life. The fullest dimension of spiritual guidance involves sharing our thoughts and yearnings, not just our sins, with this spiritual guide.

**The Eucharist and the Remission of Sins** – Several times during the Divine Liturgy we are reminded that the Eucharist is given to us “for the remission of sins.” To receive this gift we must approach “*discerning the Body,*” as St Paul says: sensing the depth of this Mystery and our unworthiness to take part in it. And so before receiving we say the prayer “I believe, Lord, and profess” specifically asking for the pardon of our offences – the deliberate and the indeliberate, whether committed knowingly or inadvertently – so that we may receive the remission of sins and eternal life in this mystery.

**Observing the Church’s Fasts** – The Fasts are another liturgical expression of repentance. Rearranging our lives in obedience to the Church’s weekly and seasonal fasts is a most practical way of affirming our commitment to life in Christ, a daily reminder that “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Mt 4:4).

**The Mystery of Confession** – This is the sacramental expression of repentance. This mystery appears in Christian history when people first realized that they had reneged on their baptismal commitment in a serious way. Confession was thus considered a “second baptism,” a starting over in the Christian life. Over the centuries it became more widely used and is considered appropriate today whenever a person feels the need for it, particularly:

- When a serious sin has been committed;
- When a habitual sin has overwhelmed the Christian;

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- When a Christian has stopped growing spiritually and needs a reorientation of priorities.

### **Forgive Others to be Forgiven**

Perhaps the most difficult part of seeking forgiveness is the one mandated by the Lord: *“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses”* (Mk 11:25). God’s forgiveness is for all; but it is only possible to those who forgive others in turn.

### **The Fathers Reaffirmed (St Gregory Palamas and the Veneration of the Relics)**

WHAT DO FASTS, METANIES, PROSTRATIONS, and standing through long church services have to do with prayer? Isn’t prayer the conversation with God we have in our hearts? Why is Eastern Christian spirituality so physical?

On the First Sunday of the Fast we proclaimed the Orthodoxy of incorporating material creation (sacred images) in our worship because the living Word of God assumed matter in becoming fully man. On this second Sunday of the Fast we affirm our use of the material in worship for a similar reason. We worship using matter because to be fully human is to be physical. The physical, we believe, will not be left behind in eternal life. The resurrection of the body is the transfiguration, not the elimination, of our physical side. Fully human worship, then, must involve the material as well as the non-material.

Two commemorations observed on this Sunday help us reflect on the physical dimension of the life in Christ. The first is the remembrance of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), who championed the Greek Fathers’ teaching on the way we have communion with God. Brought up in the Byzantine court, Gregory entered the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos when he was 20 years old. A threatened Turkish invasion of the holy mountain in 1325 brought several monks including Gregory to Thessalonika where Gregory was ordained to the priesthood and, in 1347, chosen as Metropolitan of Thessalonika. The icon of his enthronement shows him surrounded by Greek Fathers of the previous millennium whose teachings he affirmed.

### **Gregory and the Light of God**

Gregory became involved in a controversy with another Greek monk, Barlaam of Calabria, over how we can know God. The West was just getting reacquainted with the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle and others of the classical era. Many adopted their view that dialectics and metaphysics were the highest form of knowledge. Some, like Barlaam, taught that the highest possible knowledge of God that anyone could have was through the intellect.

Gregory countered with the teaching of the Fathers that the highest knowledge of God comes, not through reasoning and the application of classical philosophy, but through an

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experience of God gained through application to a life of prayer. The theologian is the person who knows God through experience, not through intellectual study. Doctrinal statements are fully meaningful only for those who have encountered the living Christ. You can study the makeup of a city all you like, he observed, but you will not know what a city is until you visit one.

Gregory further taught that a life of prayer can bring us to experience the uncreated light of God, as Peter, James and John did on Mount Tabor. God's divine actions or energies, which are to God as the light is to the sun, can touch us physically as well as spiritually. This transformation of the whole person, or *theosis*, comes about by true participation in the very life of God. The whole of human existence becomes permeated by the Divine Presence.

Barlaam countered that the grace of God we may receive is something created, distinct from Him. In this Gregory was following the Greek Fathers while Barlaam was more in the tradition of Augustine. The issue thus became part of the East/West controversy of the Middle Ages.

In the West theology became increasingly influenced by Aristotelian philosophy and tied to academic study. Piety came to be divorced from theology and even from liturgy, and focused on devotional practices such as the rosary and the Stations of the Cross. In the East theology remained connected to liturgy, prayer and ascetic endeavor: the fruit of a personal experience of God involving the whole person.

Gregory's teaching was upheld by several local councils in Constantinople which were eventually accepted by the other Byzantine Churches. While Gregory himself is remembered on the day of his death, November 14, today's commemoration focuses on the place his holistic teaching has in our understanding of the Christian life. We can directly experience the action of God in us through the Spirit who dwells in us. We can bring our whole being into contact with God through physical prayer (fasts, vigils, prostrations, etc.) as well as interior meditation. And we may, as some have done, experience the uncreated light of God in this life as well as the next.

### **God's Presence in "Mere Bones"**

A second observance today points to the presence of the divine energies of God experienced in the very remains of the saints. In the Melkite Church holy relics are solemnly venerated today as "the pledge of the glorious resurrection of sanctified bodies" (exapostilarion at orthros). Thus we venerate the relics of saints in anticipation of their future incorruptibility and their complete transformation after the resurrection.

The Second Council of Nicea which affirmed the veneration of icons also spoke about the remains of the saints: "Our Lord Jesus Christ granted to us the relics of Saints as a salvation-bearing source which pours forth varied benefits on the infirm."

What are the "varied benefits" which come from the relics of the saints? In some cases miracles, particularly healings, have taken place at the tombs or reliquaries of the saints.

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As St Ephrem the Syrian observed in the fourth century, “Even after death they act as if alive, healing the sick, expelling demons, and by the power of the Lord rejecting every evil influence of the demons. This is because the miraculous grace of the Holy Spirit is always present in the holy relics.”

In some cases the bodies of the saints have been preserved incorrupt (without decay). In other cases relics have emitted a pleasing fragrance or exuded ointment. Believers see these occasions as evidence that deification is something that involves the body. The physical can be touched by the energies of God and participate in holiness. In the words of the kondakion, “It is a great marvel indeed that healing should come forth from mere bones. Glory to the Creator, to God alone!”

Fragmentary relics are placed in the holy table when a church is consecrated. They are also found in every antimension used for the Divine Liturgy. Some icons have similar fragments in a small case embedded in them. Largely intact relics (skulls, limbs or even entire bodies) are generally preserved at the place where the saint lived. Thus the reputedly incorrupt relics of St. Gregory Palamas are kept in Thessalonika where he was bishop. Every year on this day they are brought forth in procession and placed before the bishop’s throne in the cathedral for veneration.

A Feast of the Holy Relics was formerly celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church on November 5 (or the Sunday after All Saints). It is still observed in the older rite but not in the ordinary (modern) form.

It has been said that “the work of the Church is to ‘produce relics,’” because the primary work of the Church is to lead us to theosis, to communion and union with God. By venerating the relics of the saints the Churches of East and West proclaim its commitment to that work and to the presence of the Holy Spirit in it enabling it.

### **Third Sunday of the Great Fast (Veneration of the Precious Cross)**

*Hebrews 4:14-5:6 - Mark 8:34-9:1*

#### **Christ the Eternal High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-5:6)**

REFLECT ON THIS... AND ACT ACCORDINGLY. This is the dynamic we find in the Epistle readings every Sunday during the Great Fast. We are presented with an aspect of “the mystery hidden from the ages” as a spur to recommit ourselves to the discipline of the fasting season. This Sunday is no exception; we are shown several depictions of Christ and His work and encouraged to hold fast as we enter another week of the Great Fast.

On the First Sunday the Old Testament heroes were paraded before us with the reminder that they were not perfected before us – something better is at hand. “You will see angels

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ascending and descending on the Son of Man” in the events of Pascha, so enter into the Fast with joy.

On the Second Sunday we were reminded that the Lord Jesus is not just another preacher – He is the Son of the Father, the radiance of His glory, so “Don’t neglect so great a salvation.” And today we are presented with two more images of Christ from Hebrews to encourage us.

First we are reminded that Christ, the eternal Son of God, is also totally one with us (see Heb 4:15). He is like us in everything, except for sin. He experienced all the trials of a human life, from the trauma of birth to that of death. He knew temptation first hand, “yet without sin.” He is not only higher than the angels, He is also completely human as well.

Reflecting on Christ’s perfect identity with us led the Fathers to insist that Christ was truly and perfectly both God and man by nature. To truly heal mankind of sin and death the Physician had to be truly God. But this healing could not be accomplished from outside. God would not wave a magic wand to annul our ancestral curse. Our illness was so complete and all-pervasive that this healing could only be accomplished from within, not from the outside. For that to happen the divine Physician had to completely take up our diseased nature. By living a truly human life without sin He would conquer the results of sin in Himself and then pass it on to the rest of mankind. Many Fathers expressed their belief this way: “What was not assumed was not healed.”

### **The Great High Priest**

The second image of Christ presented to us in this passage from Hebrews is that He is the Great High Priest of our Salvation. The book of Exodus describes in detail the arrangements for worship determined in the days of Moses. Israelite worship from that time centered on the tabernacle, a kind of portable sanctuary that they took with them on their journey to the Promised Land. The Temple at Jerusalem, constructed by King Solomon in the tenth century BC, duplicated the arrangements of the tabernacle in a permanent structure. This temple and its successor, built in 516 BC and rebuilt in 20 BC by King Herod, remained as the worship center for the Jews until its destruction by the Romans during the Great Jewish Revolt in AD 70.

One of the twelve tribes, the sons of Levi, was constituted as the Israelite priesthood to serve the tabernacle/temple. Moses’ brother Aaron was named by God as the first High Priest, and his successors were chosen from among his descendants. While other priests took turns serving in the temple, the High Priest was its permanent guardian. He alone could offer sacrifices for sin, particularly on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) when alone he would pronounce the unutterable name of God (Yahweh). Preceding the centuries of Roman rule the High Priest also presided over the Great Sanhedrin, the Jewish legislature. The last Jewish High Priest died in 70 AD during the destruction of the

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Temple by the Romans and the Jewish priests ceased offering sacrifices. Their descendants today, the Cohens, often play a ceremonial role in synagogue prayer services.

The destruction of the Temple and the death of the last High Priest were the greatest tragedy to befall the Jews since their exile in Babylon 600 years earlier. Since there was no Temple and no High Priest there could be no sacrifices and therefore no way to reach God according to the Torah.

But there is a High Priest, this Epistle assures the Jews, and it is the Lord Jesus Christ. Like Aaron, He was chosen by God to be High Priest in order to offer sacrifice for the sins of His people. Several times during this Epistle Psalm 110:4 is quoted: “*You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*” This verse is presented as a prophecy that the Lord’s priesthood was eternal. While the Jewish High Priests would die (or be deposed), Christ would be the ultimate High Priest, always living to make intercession for the people (see Heb 7:25).

### **One Sacrifice, One Altar**

The Torah prescribed that the High Priest offer animal sacrifices daily for the sins of the people. Christ, however, offers Himself as the one and perfect sacrifice: “...*this He did once for all when He offered up Himself*” (Heb 7:27). He is both the eternal High Priest and the perfect oblation. As the priest says while preparing the Lamb at the Divine Liturgy, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world is immolated for the life and salvation of the world.”

#### THE FRUIT OF THE SACRIFICE OF THE CROSS

##### SESSIONAL HYMN AT ORTHROS

In Paradise of old, the Enemy stripped me bare. By making me eat from the forbidden tree, he brought in death. But the tree of the Cross was planted on earth. It brought mankind the garment of life and the whole world is filled with unbounded joy. Seeing the Cross exalted, let us all cry aloud to the Lord with one voice: “Your temple is filled with Your glory!”

##### KONTAKION

The Angel’s fiery sword will no longer guard the gate of Paradise, for the Cross of the Lord has put it out wondrously. The power of Death has been broken, the victory of Hades wiped out, and You, my Savior, have stood up and called out to all those bound in Hell: “Come now; enter again into Paradise!”

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Pilate set up three crosses on Golgotha, two for the thieves and one for the Lord of life. Seeing this, Hades asked its servants: "Who has driven this spear into my heart? A wooden lance has pierced me, and I am torn apart. What pain has penetrated my womb and my heart! What sorrow stabs my spirit! I am forced to give up Adam and his children, those whom I had received from the forbidden Tree; for a new Tree leads them to enter again into Paradise.

## **The Tree of Life (Mark 8:34-9:1)**

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN THE GREAT FAST is the twenty-first day of the forty-day fast. We are half way to our Holy Week observance of the Lord's passion and resurrection. At this mid-point the Church directs our attention to the holy cross and to Christ's injunction, "*Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*" (Mk 8:34). We are encouraged to continue to "*have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*" (Galatians 5:24) during the rest of this fasting season.

The cross, adorned with flowers, is brought forth for veneration as on September 14. While that feast commemorates the historical events of the finding of the cross by St Helena and its return to Jerusalem after the Persian invasion, today's commemoration focuses on the meaning of the cross in our lives, especially during the Great Fast. The cross is the altar on which the Lamb of God was slain and is for us a constant reminder that we live in light of His perfect oblation. The joyous hirmoi of the Paschal Canon are sung at orthros today and the glorious cross is displayed in the church throughout the week, silently echoing the injunction we hear in this Epistle: "*Let us hold fast our confession ...and come boldly to the throne of grace*" (Heb 4:14, 16). Be steadfast in faith and in standing before the holy place in these days as we near the celebration of the eternal sacrifice of our great High Priest.

### **The Gospel of the Cross**

The Gospel read at the Divine Liturgy today is part of a series of five vignettes in which we see Christ coming to the end of His earthly ministry. Describing the first part of this ministry, Mark emphasizes what has been called the "Messianic secret." As Jesus teaches and performs miracles, people are regularly told to keep silent about what He has done. First of all He must form His disciples to see Him as the Messiah, the Christ. Finally, as Jesus and His followers are walking from one village to another, "*...He asked His disciples, saying to them, 'Who do men say that I am?' So they answered, 'John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered and said to Him, 'You are the Christ'*" (Mk 6:27-29). With Peter's act of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Church is born.

The Lord then begins preparing His followers to see what kind of Messiah He really is. Like many in those days, the disciples assumed that the Messiah would be a kind of Jewish Julius Caesar driving out the occupiers and restoring the kingdom to Israel. In the second vignette Jesus announces that as Messiah He will suffer, die and rise again. "*And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly*" (Mk 8:31-32). There is no Messianic secret here. The disciples must be prepared for what is to come.

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This is so far from the disciples' expectation that Peter objects. *"Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, 'Get behind Me, Satan – for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'"* (Mk 8:32-33). Peter objects; he knows what victorious generals – the things of men – look like. This third vignette shows that he as yet hasn't a clue about the things of God.

Finally we come to today's Gospel selection: the fourth vignette in this sequence. My kingdom is not what you think. Its throne is the cross and whoever wants a place in this kingdom must accept a cross as well: the cross of self denial.

As Metropolitan Anthony Bloom once said, "The Lord has told us that in the Christian Church and in the Kingdom, a King is not one who overpowers others to exact from them unconditional and slavish obedience, but He is the one who serves and gives His life for others.

"St. John Chrysostom teaches us that anyone can rule, but that no one but a king gives his life for his people, because he so identifies with his people that he has no existence, no life, no purpose but to serve them with all his life and if necessary with his death."

As followers of Christ today we may find that our stations in life will give up many opportunities for self-denial. The clergy are continually called upon to make sacrifices for the Church they have been called to serve. Monastics in their communities and spouses in their homes have daily opportunities to offer themselves for one another and the members of their families. Every Christian with open eyes will see that God gives us countless opportunities to humble ourselves for the service of others in the parish or the wider community in which we live. Taking up the cross means putting others first every day.

Our changing society is increasingly giving us opportunities to shoulder the cross in a more drastic way. You may lose your job. You may lose your health. You may lose your home. You may lose your pension or your reputation. You may lose everything on which you rely.

In this we look to Christ as our model. In the words of St. Paul, *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"* (Philippians 2:5-11)..

Christians living in countries dominated by other religions or by an aggressive secularism are finding themselves increasingly isolated and discriminated against for their faith in Christ. They might find it easier to see the choice that they are called to make than we in

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our as yet more accepting society. Their choice may be to deny Christ or leave town. Our choice may be to affirm a neighbor's abortion or to lose the friendship of their family.

In either case these cautionary words of our Lord apply: *“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels”* (Mk 8:35-38).

### **Fasting and Taking Up the Cross**

We still have a few weeks of the Fast remaining. They give us the opportunity to assess whether we are more committed to our small comforts or to the call of Christ. If we are so enslaved to certain foods and entertainments, how will we be able to give up something more serious for the sake of God's kingdom? The Great Fast helps us to see the depth of our willingness to take up the cross in our daily life.

### **The Cross in Our Liturgy (Veneration of the Cross)**

PEOPLE WERE FASCINATED by the degree of realism and downright sadism portrayed in Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*. The physical sufferings inflicted on the film's Jesus were far more gruesome than anything described in the Gospels. In fact, the film relied less on the Scriptures than on visions attributed to the nineteenth century German nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich by her countryman, the poet Clemens Brentano.

The film and the visions it portrays have both been criticized for their departure from the Gospel. Still they stand in a tradition, particularly strong in medieval Europe, which emphasized the physical suffering of Christ in the passion more than His sinless response to the torment. Much of this emphasis stems from the medieval idea that the passion was inflicted on Christ as a punishment for our sins.

The vision of the cross in our liturgy is very different, particularly as expressed in the Mid-week of the Great Fast when we solemnly bring it forth and venerate it. The cross is carried in procession around the church during the great doxology of orthros (matins) to the ringing of the church bells. It is surrounded with flowers which, in many churches, are distributed to the participants as they come forward to venerate the cross. The cross is considered, as in the early Church, as first of all a sign of Christ's triumph over death: ineffable joy for those who believe in Him. As St John Chrysostom emphasized, the cross *“...is the originator not so much of suffering as of passionlessness.”*

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This emphasis should not surprise us if we but reflect on the hymns which we sing on this Sunday and through the week. One of the most frequently repeated is the kondakion, a veritable paean of triumph:

“The Angel’s fiery sword will no longer guard the gate of Paradise, for the Cross of the Lord has put it out wondrously. The power of Death has been broken, the victory of Hades wiped out, and You, my Savior, have stood up and called out to all those bound in Hell: “Come now; enter again into Paradise!”

The angel’s sword mentioned in the kondakion refers to the last line in the story of the fall, Gn 3:23, 4: “...*the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life*”.

Other hymns of this feast reflect the same excitement. At vespers we sing:

“Hail, O life-bearing Cross, bright Paradise of the Church, Tree of incorruption! You have obtained for us the enjoyment of everlasting glory. Through you, the hosts of devils are driven out, the choirs of Angels rejoice as one, and the company of the faithful hold celebrations. Unconquerable weapon, impregnable stronghold, triumph of kings and pride of priests: grant that we may be witnesses to Christ’s Passion and Resurrection!”

At orthros we hear:

“In Paradise of old, the Enemy stripped me bare. By making me eat from the forbidden tree, he brought in death. But the tree of the Cross was planted on earth. It brought mankind the garment of life and the whole world is filled with unbounded joy. Seeing the Cross exalted, let us all cry aloud to the Lord with one voice: ‘Your temple is filled with Your glory!’”

“It is a festive day in Heaven; for Death is wiped out by the Resurrection of Christ. Once again life springs forth, and Adam is raised and exults with joy. Let us all praise the victory of the Lord.”

“Joy reigns on earth and in Heaven today, for the sign of the Cross has shone over the world; its thrice-blessed image is a fountain of eternal joy for those who venerate it.”

“Cleansed by abstinence, let us hasten with fervor to kiss and glorify the most holy wood on which Christ was crucified and saved the world in His goodness.”

“O faithful, let us cry out in joy to our God, clapping our hands with the divine praise; let us kiss the Cross of the Lord. It is a fountain of holiness for the whole world.”

“Today the Cross of Christ pours out its sweet aroma: it is the wood that blossoms forth life. Let us breathe in this pleasing scent of the Divinity, which we bless forever and ever.”

“Rejoice and dance for joy, O holy Church of God, who bows today before the thrice-blessed wood of the holy Cross of Christ. Hosts of angels in Heaven stand trembling before it.”

Perhaps most surprising are the verses of the canon chanted at orthros:

“Today us the day of the resurrection! O nations, let us be jubilant! For this Passover is the Passover of the Lord, in that Christ made us pass from death to life and from earth to Heaven, we who sing the song of victory!”

“Come, let us drink a new drink: not miraculously produced from a barren rock, but from the Fount of immortality springing forth from the tomb of Christ, in which we are established.”

“Let the God-inspired Habakkuk the prophet stand with us on the holy watch-tower. Let him point out to the radiant angel who proclaims with vibrant voice: Today salvation comes to the world, for Christ is risen as all-powerful!”

Do they sound familiar?

It is the Paschal Canon by St John of Damascus which is sung as matins on the feast of the Resurrection! This Mid-Sunday of the Fast is nothing other than an anticipation of Pascha. We venerate the cross and sing paschal hymns to encourage us to continue our ascetic efforts during the Fast. As food, drink and rest restore us physically, the veneration of the cross is meant to refresh us spiritually and strengthen us to continue our journey through the Great Fast.

Few of us would participate so wholeheartedly in a joyful celebration – wedding, anniversary, office party – without bringing something to the feast. Our joy in the cross is authentic to the degree that we bring the fruit of repentance, re-focusing our energy on the spiritual life as completely as we can during this season. We turn away from food, drink, or entertainment to signify that we are reordering our lives away from obedience to our passions (gluttony, lust, greed, etc.) in response to the gift of God’s love manifested on the cross.

### **St Ephrem the Syrian on the Cross**

“By the holy armor of the Cross Christ the Lord has obstructed the all-consuming bowels of Hades and blocked the many snares in the mouth of the devil. Having seen the Cross, death trembled and released everyone whom she possessed with the first created man. Armed with the Cross, the God-bearing apostles subdued all the power of the enemy and caught all peoples in their nets... Clothed in the Cross as in armor, the martyrs of Christ

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trampled all the plans of torturers and preached with plainness the Divine Cross-bearer. Having taken up the Cross for the sake of Christ, those who renounced everything in the world settled in deserts and on mountains, in caves and became the fasters of the earth.

“What language is worthy to praise the Cross, this invincible wall of the Orthodox, this victorious armor of the Heavenly King?! By the cross the Almighty One bestowed unspeakable blessings on humanity! And so on our forehead, on our eyes, on our mouth, and on our breasts let us place the life-giving Cross. Let us arm ourselves with the invincible armor of Christians, with this hope of the faithful, with this gentle light. Let us open paradise with this armor, with this support of the Orthodox faith, with this saving praise of the Church. Not for one hour, not for one instant, let us forget the Cross, nor let us begin to do anything without it. But let us sleep, let us arise, let us work, let us eat, let us drink, let us go on our way ... adorning all our members with the life-giving Cross.”

#### **Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast (St John Climacus)**

*Hebrews 6:13-20 – Mark 9:17-31*

#### **A Priest Like Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:13-20)**

WHEN THE RISEN CHRIST APPEARED to His disciples He reminded them “...*that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me*” (Luke 24:44). When we think of the Old Testament prophecies we naturally look to figures like Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest who are formally labeled as “prophets.” The Lord’s words quoted above indicate that there are also prophecies in the Law and in the Psalms as well.

In the New Testament there are several psalm verses quoted as referring to the Lord Jesus as the Messiah. At the beginning of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for example, Ps 2:7 is cited: “*To which of the angels did He [i.e. God] ever say, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten You’*” (Heb 1:5).

The first Christians did not invent the idea that Scriptural events and texts applied to the Messiah. The Jews looked to the coming of the Messiah and saw references to him in the Scriptures. Early Christians were simply continuing a tradition they had received from Judaism. The difference, of course, was that the Christians believed that Jesus was that Messiah and the Scriptures referred to Him.

#### **Messianic Prophecies in the Psalms**

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In his Letter to Marcellinus, St. Athanasius the Great, the fourth century archbishop of Alexandria, gave his reader an overview of the psalms understood as referring to the Messiah. He writes, “If you want to sing Psalms that speak especially about the Savior you will find something in almost all of them; but 45 and 110 relate particularly to His Divine Begetting from the Father and His coming in the flesh, while 22 and 69 foretell the holy cross, the grievous plot He endured and what great things He suffered for our sakes. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 109<sup>th</sup> also display the snares and malice of the Jews and how Iscariot betrayed Him; 21, 50 and 72 all set Him forth as Judge and foretell His Second Coming in the flesh to us; they also show the call of the Gentiles. The 16<sup>th</sup> shows His resurrection from the dead in the flesh; the 24<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> His ascension into heaven. And in the four Psalms 93, 96, 98 and 99 all the benefits deriving to us from the Savior’s Passion are set forth together.”

(While St. Athanasius followed the numbering in the Greek Septuagint version (LXX), the above translation follows the Hebrew numeration rather than the Greek, since that is the system used in most English versions.)

We often find psalms and individual verses interpreted as messianic in the liturgical services, particularly on the Great Feasts. Verses of Psalm 2, for example, are associated with the Feast of Christ’s Nativity and also with Holy Friday: “*Why do the nations rage and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed*” (Ps 2:1,2). At Christmas these verses bring to mind Herod’s plot against the Infant; on Holy Friday they speak to us of the Sanhedrin denouncing Jesus to Pilate. A subsequent verse – “*He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision*” (Ps 2:4) – recall the ultimate failure of both these plots to destroy the Lord Jesus.

Messianic foreshadowings in other psalms have made them important parts of our liturgical celebrations of the mysteries they typify. Psalm 22 (LXX: 21), for example, is for many Christians a description of the experience of Christ on the cross. Mt 27:46 indicates that Christ began to recite this psalm as He was dying. The opening verses of Psalm 68 (LXX: 67) are sung with the refrain “Christ is risen...” as the solemn proclamation of the resurrection on Pascha. Christ’s ascension is understandably evoked in Ps 47: 5 (LXX: 46): “*God has gone up with a shout; the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.*”

One of the references to Christ in the Psalms is repeatedly quoted in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “*The Lord has sworn and he will not relent: you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*” (Ps 110:4; LXX: 109). Since this epistle depicts Christ’s sacrifice in terms of the Yom Kippur ritual in the Jewish temple, applying a reference to priesthood is not surprising, but who is Melchizedek?

### **Priest of the Most High**

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Melchizedek makes his only Scriptural appearance in Genesis 14. There Abram (later Abraham), then an ally of the king of Sodom, defeats Chedorlaomer, a warring king. The king of Sodom goes out to greet Abram on his victory. Then we are told, “*Melchizedek, king of Salem brought out bread and wine, and being a priest of God Most High, he blessed Abram with these words: ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your foes into your hand.’ Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything*” (Gen 14:18-20).

Some Jewish commentators identified Melchizedek with Shem, the son of Noah and descendant of Adam. In one tradition, the *Book of Adam and Eve*, Shem officiated at Adam’s funeral when he was fifteen, because he was a priest as Adam was. Adam’s priesthood was that of every human being: to refer all things back to their Creator in thanks and praise. To be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek would be to be a priest according to the order of Adam.

Melchizedek’s priesthood was connected with a line that predates Moses and Aaron, and links him directly to Adam and God. To be a priest after the manner of Melchizedek, then, means to be a priest with a heritage that was older than that of the Jewish temple priesthood descended from Moses’ brother, Aaron. As “a priest of God Most High” from the earliest ages of mankind, Melchizedek represents a faith in the One God that predates Judaism and suggests the “natural monotheism” of ancient man.

Hebrews, reflecting on the picture of Melchizedek in Genesis, describes Melchizedek as “*without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God...*” (Heb 7:3). This image suggests that Melchizedek is not a priest by descent from a priestly line, but by nature. Melchizedek was considered a fitting type of Christ, the eternal Word of God, whose priesthood is eternal and brings together Jews and Gentiles without distinction before the throne of the Father.

Another image in the story of Melchizedek struck a chord for the early Christians. Melchizedek “*brought out bread and wine,*” probably as a gesture of hospitality. When seen in light of Melchizedek’s priesthood, these gifts become a type of the Eucharistic elements, connected to both the natural priesthood of Adam and the New Testament priesthood of the New Adam, Christ.

### **Prayer, Fasting and Asceticism (Mark 9:17-31)**

“*THIS KIND CAN COME OUT BY NOTHING but prayer and fasting*” (Mk 9:29). The last words of this Gospel passage explain its selection for reading at today’s Divine Liturgy, In the home stretch of the Great Fast we may need to be reminded that effectiveness in the Christian life demands more than occasional application. We must apply ourselves

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regularly and consistently to maintaining our life in Christ for it to bear fruit. This constant living out of our faith is called asceticism, from the Greek word for “struggle,” *ascesis*.

St Paul witnesses frequently to the ascetical nature of Christian spiritual life. He uses both athletic and military imagery to present the life in Christ as, at least in part, a struggle. Consider the following:

- *“The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. ... and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts”* (Rom 13:12-14).
- *“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown”* (1 Cor 9:24-26)
- *“Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified”* (1 Cor 9:26-27).
- *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil....For we wrestle not against flesh and blood...”* (Eph 6:11-12).
- *“...forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”* (Phil 3:13-14).
- *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day...”* (2 Tim 4:8).

Training for an athletic contest or for a military expedition demands single-minded commitment to the struggle. Our eye must be continually on the goal and our will firm to do anything in order to achieve it.

### **A Spiritual Combat**

In St Paul’s day Christians had no lack of enemies striving to eliminate their Churches as damaging to the state or to established religions. Yet the Apostle does not finger these opponents when describing the struggle.

St Paul identified what would later be called *spiritual warfare*: the interior struggle to keep our minds and hearts centered on the Lord. *“For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members”* (Romans 7:22-23). The real struggle, Paul teaches, is not with enemies outside but with our own broken nature. The arena where Christians would struggle was not the coliseum but the heart.

The Church’s spiritual masters from the Desert Fathers to our own day have sought to determine the course of our spiritual struggle. They agree that our interior combat begins

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with the assault of what they called *logismoi*, random thoughts that suggest definite wrongdoing or simply not doing what it takes to keep in shape. There is no word to accurately translate *logismoi*. It has been variously translated as “prodigal thoughts,” “impulses,” “provocations,” “temptations” or “the seeds of the passions, those suggestions or impulses that emerge from the subconscious and soon become obsessive... blockages, usurpations, deviations that destroy the human being’s basic desire.”

These “prodigal thoughts” come to us unbidden from our past, from what we see others do, from entertainment media, from many sources. We may dismiss them and continue on our chosen path or entertain them, allowing them to convince us that what they propose is right for us. As Evagrius of Pontus noted in the fourth century, “It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions.”

Metropolitan Kallistos (Timothy Ware) once described *logismoi* as “first whispered by demons in obedience to the will of the Satan (the Tempter),” locating their source as further beyond our broken nature. This, too, is suggested by St. Paul who teaches that “*we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 6:12).

Evagrius, writing in the same tradition, insists, “Demons first inspire thoughts and these, when they are allowed to linger, unleash the passions in us. The remedy against this system of demonic attacks is a constant vigilance over thoughts, never allowing them to linger.”

Right about now many of us may be assaulted by *logismoi* suggesting that we dispense ourselves from the Fast, skip a Lenten service, or return to any amusements we have given up for the season. We may be like many who commit themselves to regimens of diet and exercise for a short time and then are tempted to abandon them because they do not see speedy progress. It is, however, one’s commitment to the contest which brings about greater results. As Pope Paul VI noted in another context, “All life demands struggle. Those who have everything given to them become lazy, selfish, and insensitive to the real values of life. The very striving and hard work that we so constantly try to avoid is the major building block in the person we are today.”

### **Prayer, Fasting and Spiritual Power**

The nineteenth century Russian Saint, Theophan the Recluse, once wrote, “The demons can sense a faster and man of prayer from a distance, and they run far away from him so as avoid a painful blow.”

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The opposite is also true as we read in Sotos Chondropoulos' life of St. Nectarios of Aegina: "One time there was an archimandrite from Egypt who found himself in Athens on some religious business. Although he was a cleric, he was one only by profession... When he performed the Divine Liturgy he did it mechanically, without the faith and humility which is required..."

[Told about a girl supposedly possessed by an evil spirit, he asserted confidently "There are no demons today" and declared that girl must be a schizophrenic. He would see for himself. When he arrives the possessed girl addressed him laughingly:] "My dear priest, how beautiful and playful you seem..." Seizing him she shouted "You dirty, filthy worm... Isn't it you that hasn't left a girl or woman in Alexandria untouched? You dare to insist that I do not exist? Then I will make an account of all the 'good works' you have done as a mocker of sacred things." [She told of one scandalous incident after another. The archimandrite collapsed and had to be taken away. The girl was eventually freed from the spirit after being anointed with oil from a lamp at St Nektarios' tomb.]

### **Fruit of the Desert - Saint John Climacus**

AT THE FOOT OF MOUNT SINAI, in the Egyptian peninsula of the same name, sits the monastery of St Catherine. It has been inhabited continuously for over 1700 years, making it one of the oldest such places in the world. Its unique climate has preserved icons and manuscripts from the first millennium AD that look as if they were just made. The greatest treasures it has produced, however, are its spiritual riches: over 170 saints honored in the Greek Orthodox and Catholic Churches, chief among them being St John Climacus.

A native of the region, St John lived in the sixth century. At 16 he became a monk and spent the rest of his life as an ascetic. For most of his life he lived in a hermitage at the foot of the mountain. When he was 75, he was chosen as abbot of St Catherine's Monastery but ended his life back in solitude, as a desert-dwelling ascetic.

In the early seventh century another John, abbot of the Raithu monastery on the shores of the Red Sea, asked our John to write a guide to the spiritual life for the monks of Raithu. The result was the *klimax* or *Ladder* by which John of Sinai has been known ever since. Using the imagery of Jacob's ladder (see Gen 28:10-19), he portrays the ascetic life as a climb to heaven with each rung on the ladder being a virtue to be acquired.

A twelfth-century icon preserved at the monastery shows monks climbing this ladder. Some acquire all the virtues and complete the ascent to God; others fall off, pulled down by the passions, unable to endure the ascetic life to the end.

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It has long been the custom in monasteries to read *The Ladder* each year during the Great Fast. This in turn gave rise to the commemoration of St John on the Fourth Sunday of the Fast.

### **The Rungs of the Ladder**

The first seven rungs portray the most basic virtues necessary for an ascetic life: renunciation of the world, detachment from what was left behind, exile from all we have known, obedience (which is voluntary death of the ego), repentance, the remembrance of death, and cultivating a spirit of mourning.

The remaining rungs detail steps needed to make progress on this way of life, such as freedom from anger and irritability, forgetting of wrongs suffered, avoiding gossip and slander, and conquering despondency. Battling gluttony, lust and greed through fasting from food, drink and sleep are depicted as the daily work of the monk. “The farmer’s wealth is gathered on the threshing floor and in the wine-press, but the wealth and knowledge of monks is gathered during the evening and the night hours while standing in prayer and engaging in spiritual activity” (Step 20).

On subsequent rungs the monk confronts more dangerous enemies – pride and vanity – through humility and the revealing of one’s inmost thoughts. Only through the acquisition of these virtues can the monk attain to prayer, love, and heaven on earth: the state of communion with God.

### **Some Excerpts from *The Ladder***

“Blessed is he who, though maligned and disparaged every day for the Lord’s sake, constrains himself to be patient. He will join the chorus of the martyrs and boldly converse with the angels.

“Blessed is the monk who regards himself as hourly deserving every dishonor and disparagement. Blessed is he who mortifies his own will to the end, and leaves the care of himself to his director in the Lord; for he will be placed at the right hand of the Crucified. He who will not accept a reproof, just or unjust, renounces his own salvation. But he who accepts it with an effort, or even without an effort, will soon receive the remission of his sins.” *From the Fourth Rung*

“Greater than baptism itself is the fountain of tears after baptism, even though it is somewhat audacious to say so. For baptism is the washing away of evils that were in us before, but sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears. As baptism is received in infancy, we have all defiled it, but we cleanse it anew with tears. And if God, in His love for mankind, had not given us tears, those being saved would be few indeed.” *From the Seventh Rung*

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“Forgetting the wrongs we have suffered is a sign of true repentance. But he who dwells on them and thinks that he is repenting is like a man who thinks he is running while he is really asleep.” *From the Ninth Rung*

“He who has become aware of his sins has controlled his tongue, but a talkative person has not yet come to know himself as he should.” *From the Eleventh Rung*

“He who has tasted the things on high easily despises what is below; but he who has not tasted the things above finds joy in possessions.” *From the Seventeenth Rung*

“It is not darkness or the desolateness of place that gives the demons power against us, but barrenness of soul. Through God’s providence this sometimes happens in order that we may learn by it.” *From the Twenty-First Rung*

“Blasphemous thoughts, that deceiver and corrupter of souls, has often driven many out of their mind. No other thought is so difficult to tell in confession as this. That is why it often remains with many to the very end of their lives. For nothing gives the demons and bad thoughts such power over us as nourishing and hiding them in our heart unconfessed.” *From the Twenty-third Rung*

“The natural property of the lemon tree is such that it lifts its branches upwards when it has no fruit; but the more the branches bend down, the more fruit they bear. Those who have the mind to understand will grasp the meaning of this.” *From the Twenty-Fifth Rung*

“Before all else let us first list sincere thanksgiving on the scroll of our prayer. On the second line we should put confession and heartfelt contrition of soul. Then let us present our petition to the King of all. This is the best way of prayer, as it was shown to one of the brethren by an angel of the Lord.”

“If you feel sweetness or compunction at some word of your prayer, dwell on it; for then our guardian angel is praying with us.”

“Your prayer will show you what condition you are in. Theologians say that prayer is the mirror of the monk.” *From the Twenty-Eighth Rung*

#### **And if You Are Not a Monk...**

“Some people living carelessly in the world have asked me ‘We have wives and are beset with social cares, and how can we lead the solitary life?’

“I replied to them, ‘Do all the good you can. Do not speak evil of anyone. Do not steal from anyone. Do not lie to anyone. Do not be arrogant towards anyone. Do not hate anyone. Do not be absent from the divine services. Be compassionate to the needy. Do not offend anyone. Do not wreck another man’s domestic happiness and be content with what your own wives can give you. If you behave in this way, you will not be far from the Kingdom of Heaven.’” *From the First Rung*

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“Let us observe and we shall find that the spiritual trumpet serves as an outward signal for the gathering of the brethren, but it is also the unseen signal for the assembly of our foes. Some of them stand by our bed and, when we get up, urge us to lie down again. ‘Wait,’ they say, ‘until the preliminary hymns are finished, then you can go to church.’ Others plunge those standing at prayer into sleep. Some produce severe, unusual pains in the stomach. Others urge us on to make conversation in church. Some entice the mind to shameful thoughts. Others make us lean against the wall as though from fatigue. Sometimes they involve us in fits of yawning. Some of them bring on waves of laughter during prayer... Some force us to hurry the reading or chanting merely from laziness; others suggest that we should chant more slowly for the pleasure of it, and sometimes they sit at our mouths and shut them so that we can scarcely open them. He who reckons with feeling of heart that he is standing before God in prayer shall be an unshakable pillar, and none of the aforesaid demons will make sport of him.” *From the Nineteenth Rung*

### **Saturday of the Akathist**

In Byzantine Churches of the Greek or “Southern” tradition it is customary to serve Compline with the Akathist to the Theotokos on the Friday evenings during the Great Fast. Due to the pressures of the work and school week this is often the only Lenten weekday service many parishioners attend. In fact this is not an actual Lenten service, such as Great Compline or the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. Rather it is a weekend service, ushering in our Saturday observance.

Saturday and Sunday, remember, are generally not fast days. This is why our Churches observe festivals like the Saturday of the Ascetics or the Sunday of Orthodoxy on weekends during the Fast. The Akathist service is connected to one of these feast days called, appropriately enough, the Saturday of the Akathist.

### **What is This Festival?**

The Saturday of the Akathist recalls three important events in Byzantine history. On August 8, 626 the imperial capital, Constantinople, was attacked by both the Persians and the Scythians (Iranian tribes living along the Black Sea in today’s Crimea and Ossetia). A sudden hurricane scattered the invading ships and the attackers retreated. The Byzantines ascribed this turn of events to the intercession of the Theotokos. As the Synaxarion relates, they spent the entire night giving thanks for their deliverance. Two later victories over Muslim Arab and Turkish invaders in the seventh and eighth centuries occasioned the observance of a common feast of thanksgiving to the

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Theotokos during the Fast (the Muslim sieges took place in the spring). The Saturday of the Akathist is observed on the fifth Saturday of the Fast.

### **Preparing for the Annunciation**

On the Saturday of the Akathist the entire hymn is sung at Compline. On the previous four Fridays parts of it are sung in anticipation of this feast and of the Great Feast of the Annunciation, which falls on March 25. Since this feast falls during the Great Fast or the Great Week it does not have the extended celebration – sometimes a week or more – which marks the other Great Feasts during the year. The Church “makes up” for this by celebrating the Annunciation in advance on these weekends.

In addition to the Akathist itself, Compline on Lenten Fridays includes the singing of a canon to the Theotokos by St Joseph the Hymnographer, the ninth-century monk in Constantinople who composed many of the canons in our service books, the Menaion and the Paraklitiki. The troparia in this canon are written as an acrostic, with the first letter of each troparion combining to spell out the phrase “*Vessel of joy, to you alone ‘Hail!’ belongs.*” These acrostics are almost never evident in translation of these hymns.

### **Fifth Sunday of the Great Fast (St Mary of Egypt)**

*Hebrews 11:9-14 – Mark 10:32-45*

#### **A Shadow of Things to Come (Hebrews 11:9-14)**

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES are often fulfilled in new and definitive ways in the Gospels. Thus Isaiah’s prophecy of a young girl’s conception would be decisively fulfilled in the conception of Christ by the ever-virgin Mary.

St Paul recognizes another kind of connection between the Old and the New Testaments. In Colossians 2:17 he notes that Old Testament observances “... *are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*” When we stress the connection between actual persons, events, places, and institutions of the Old Testament, and the corresponding reality in the New Testament which they foreshadowed, this is called **typology**. Thus, for example, the Mosaic Passover (Pascha) celebrating the passage

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of the Hebrews from slavery to freedom is a “type” of the New Passover (Pascha) in which Christ leads humanity from death to eternal life.

Typology is most developed in the Epistle to the Hebrews concerning the temple and the sacrificial role of its priests. When the temple was destroyed and the last High Priest died in AD 70 the Jews were devastated. Here the Christ-believing Jews were reassured that we have the ultimate High Priest in the Lord Jesus of whom earlier High Priests were but a type (see Heb 7:23-8:1). *“For the Law appoints as high priests men who have weaknesses, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever”* (v. 28).

### **The Temple and its Sacrifices**

The arrangements of the Jewish tabernacle and its permanent version, the temple, are set forth in the Torah (Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers) according to a “pattern” shown to Moses on Mount Sinai. The tabernacle/temple is thus a “type,” a reality in itself pointing to something beyond. In Hebrews 8:5 it is described as *“the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle.”*

In the Book of Revelation, St John describes his vision of eternity in similar terms: *“And after that I looked, and, behold, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened”* (Revelation 15:5). He describes angels in white robes with their chests girded with golden bands (like deacons) and white-robed elders making prostrations. There is singing and incense and the Lamb who stands before the throne of God, having redeemed mankind by His blood.

The earthly temple and its rites were a shadow patterned after the eternal liturgy of heaven where an eternal High Priest would offer Himself to the Father to renew His creation. The sacrifices of the earthly High Priest were types of the sacrifice of Christ the Lamb, who stands before the throne of God bearing the blood of His own self-offering for the salvation of the world.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews the work of Christ is described in terms of the Jewish High Priest and the temple. The High Priest, we are told, went into the innermost part of the temple, called the Holy of Holies, only once a year (on Yom Kippur) with the blood of the sacrificed sin offering. But now, Christ the eternal High Priest has entered *“the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Holy of Holies once for all, having obtained eternal redemption”* (Heb 9:11-12). *“Now to appear in the presence of God for us”* (Heb 9:24). He always lives to make intercession for those who come to God through Him (see Heb 7:25).

### **The Temple and Our Churches**

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The temple, its priesthood and its sacrifices, then, were but types of the eternal sacrifice of Christ which would achieve eternal redemption once for all. Our Eastern Christian temples and our sacrifice of praise, the Divine Liturgy, do more than point us to the heavenly liturgy; through them we are connected to the eternal and ongoing dimension of Christ's sacrifice which is at the center and summit of all true worship in both the Old and New Testaments.

The very design of our churches is meant to show that the mystery of salvation, which was foreshadowed in the Old Testament temple, has been fulfilled in Christ. Many elements are similar. We have the holy place (the solea) and the holy of holies (the altar), the incense, the cherubim (ripidia) and the candelabrum. Other elements indicate that what were types have been fulfilled. In place of the jar of manna (see Heb 9:1-5) we have the Eucharist. In place of the Tablets of the Law or the Torah we have the Gospel. In place of Aaron's rod we have the holy cross. And in place of the impenetrable veil we have the iconostasis which makes both visible and accessible the mystery of our salvation in Christ.

### **What Happens in the Liturgy**

Our Divine Liturgy is a kind of living icon, using the imagery of the temple's sacrificial rite to show that the Eucharist is our participation in Christ's unique sacrifice. The Liturgy is neither a separate sacrifice nor a mere remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, but an actual entry into that sacrifice, possible because it is offered in "God's time" rather than ours.

As the sacrificial animals were killed outside the holy place and Christ was killed outside the Holy City, the oblations are prepared outside the holy place, in the prothesis (in smaller churches the prothesis is to the side of the holy place).

As the animals were brought by the Levites to the priests to be offered, the holy gifts are brought by the deacons and priests to the bishop who takes them into the holy place.

As the High Priest took the annual sin offering behind the veil into the Holy of Holies, Christ is described as taking His own blood into the heavenly sanctuary behind the veil. When the oblations are placed on the holy table, the doors and curtain are closed and the prayer of offering is recited "behind the veil." This imagery is lost, of course, when the doors and curtain are never closed.

As Christ, having made His offering, remains before the presence of the Father interceding "*for those who come to God through Him*" (Heb 7:25), so the celebrant, after the holy gifts have been offered and sanctified, stands before the holy table making intercession for the entire Church, the living and the dead.

As the sacrificial offerings in the temple would then be shared among the priests and those who offered them, the Eucharist is distributed first to the clergy and then to the members of the congregation.

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And so we too have a High Priest, whose sacrifice takes away the sin of the world. And through the Divine Liturgy we can connect with that unique and eternal sacrifice again and again. *“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holy of Holies by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith”* (Heb 10:19, 22).

Christ’s sacrifice of His whole being is accepted by the Father. For our offering to be joined to His it must also be the complete offering of “ourselves, one another and our whole life” to Him. May the remaining days of the Fast remind us that we are not created to be satisfied by the temporary pleasures of acquisition and consumption but by the everlasting joys of the heavenly liturgy.

### **The Road to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32-45)**

*“BEHOLD, WE ARE GOING UP TO JERUSALEM, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again”* (Mk 10:33-34).

As the Great Fast draws to a close, we turn our eyes to Jerusalem where the Lord will undergo His life-giving passion and death for us. He had spoken repeatedly of the suffering He would endure but, as the Gospel records, His disciples *“did not understand this saying and were afraid to ask Him”* (Mk 9:32).

When Jesus first spoke of the sufferings awaiting Him, *“Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him”* (Mk 8:32). By the time recorded in this Sunday’s Gospel selection, the disciples understood the threat posed by Jesus’ enemies and *“they were afraid”* (Mk 10:32). In John 10 we read that Jesus’ foes *“...sought again to seize Him, but He escaped out of their hand. And He went away again beyond the Jordan... and there He stayed”* (Jn 10:39-40).

Still the disciples did not fully comprehend what would happen. At this stage they still saw the Kingdom of God as being “of this world” and were concerned about their own status in this Kingdom as they understood it. They envisioned Jesus restoring Israel’s freedom from the Romans and securing an independent state for God’s people. The sons of Zebedee, James and John, wanted to be Jesus’ principal aides, at His right and left hands in His “glory.” But Jesus’ glory would be the glory of sacrifice, on the cross, and others were destined to be at His right and left hand there.

### **Why Go to Jerusalem?**

The practice of spending the great feasts of the Jews – Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot – in Jerusalem was based on the precept in the Book of Exodus: *“Offer a sacrifice to Me three times each year. Keep the festival of Matzos [Passover]... the reaping festival [Shavuot]... the harvest festival [Sukkot] ...Three times each year; every male among you must appear before God the Lord”* (Exodus 23:14-17). Since sacrifices were only performed in the temple people would regularly visit Jerusalem on these feasts.

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The Gospels record several visits by the Lord to Jerusalem for these feasts, the first being when He was twelve years old (see Lk 2:41-51). This visit, however, would be a climactic one, culminating in His death and resurrection. The version of the Mosaic commandment in the book of Deuteronomy adds a note: *“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God ... and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you”* (Deut 16:16-17). In His Incarnation Christ received the gift of His human nature – He would now give it back to the Father on the cross. But God, who would not allow the death of Abraham’s son Isaac (see Gen 18), would not permit His own Son to remain in the grave, but raised Him up on the third day.

### **Another Trip to Jerusalem (St Mary of Egypt)**

ON THIS LAST SUNDAY OF THE GREAT FAST the Church also remembers another trip to Jerusalem: one that occurred some 300 years after Christ. According to the life written by St. Sophronios, Patriarch of Jerusalem in the seventh century, Mary the Egyptian was a runaway teenager who drifted into a fast lifestyle in Alexandria living in part on the proceeds of the sexual favors she dispensed.

When she was 29 Mary attached herself to a group going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She went, not out of piety, but to meet others devoted to the same lifestyle. According to Sophronios, she never lacked for companions both on the journey and when she arrived in the Holy City.

One day, curiosity prompted her to follow some pilgrims to the Anastasis, the church build over Christ’s tomb. She found herself unable to enter, resisted by an unseen force. Believing that this was because of her wild way of life, she was struck with remorse. She prayed before an icon of the Theotokos in the courtyard, asking for forgiveness and vowing to abandon the world and its pleasures. Returning to the church door she found herself now able to enter.

Returning to give thanks before the icon, Mary heard a voice promising, “If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest/ true peace.” After confessing and receiving Communion, she went into the desert where she remained a hermit for the rest of her life.

The image of this extraordinary repentance and commitment to asceticism is held up to the Church as an encouragement to enter wholeheartedly into the remainder of the Fast and the Great Week which follows.

**After distancing yourself from the weight of the passions by contemplating God, O Mary, you directed your desires and deeds to that which is on high. Gazing at the icon of the all-pure Virgin and resolutely renouncing all sin, you confidently went to worship the precious Cross.**

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**You joyfully visited the holy places, nourished by virtue on the path of salvation, rapidly traveling along the road of holiness. Crossing the streams of the Jordan and dwelling in the wilderness like the Baptist you tamed the rebelliousness of the flesh, calming the wild nature of the passions, O venerable Mother Mary, by your holy way of life. (*Vespers*)**

### **The Week of Palms – A Prelude to Salvation**

THE SIXTH WEEK OF THE GREAT FAST has a two-fold designation in our liturgical books. First of all, it marks the end of this fasting season. We also fast during the Great and Holy Week of the Lord's Passion, but that observance is not part of the Great Fast. The Great Fast has prepared us to celebrate the paschal mystery of Christ's saving passion, death and resurrection by inviting us to refocus our lives on God in repentance. During the Holy Week our fasting has a different character: it is a way of observing the sorrowful events of this week: the plotting against Christ, His betrayal, passion, death and burial.

Between the two fast periods we observe the double feast of Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday. This last week of the Great Fast is simultaneously a week of preparation for these feasts. In our liturgical books this week, then, is called the Week of Palms, looking forward to that celebration.

The hymns prescribed to be sung this week in Vespers, Orthros (Matins) and the Presanctified Liturgy reflect both of these themes. On one hand the services include chants focused on the end of the Great Fast such as the final sticheron sung this coming Friday:

“Count us worthy of beholding the week of Your Passion, O Lover of Mankind, for we have completed the forty days of the Fast for the profit of our souls. Let us glorify Your mighty deeds, Your ineffable dispensation for our sake, singing with one mind: ‘O Lord, glory to You!’”

Other chants reflect the coming feast, recalling Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. At Orthros on Monday, for example, we sing:

“O faithful, let us prepare to celebrate Palm Sunday, joyfully observing the forefeast from this present day onwards, so that we may be counted worthy to see the life-giving Passion.”

### **The Death of Lazarus**

Even more of this week's hymnody recalls the raising of Lazarus, whom the Gospel describes as having died four days before Christ raised him.

About one-and-a-half miles east of Jerusalem lay the village of Bethany (today's al-'Azariya), the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. St. John's Gospel tells us in detail how Jesus was informed that Lazarus was sick. “*This sickness is not unto death,*” He

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answered, *“but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it”* (Jn 11:4). By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany Lazarus was already dead for four days.

The dramatic story of the raising of Lazarus from the grave is celebrated in Byzantine Churches on the first day of the Great Week of Christ’s passion, Lazarus Saturday. A day of resurrection, we observe it as a Sunday with the appropriate resurrectional prayers and chants. The resuscitation of Lazarus was the Lord’s greatest miracle so far, but would be but a prelude to His own resurrection which we celebrate on Pascha.

The Gospel says that Jesus returned to Bethany and, while they were at table, Mary anointed Him with costly ointment. When Judas questioned this act of extravagance, Jesus reproved him, *“Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of my burial”* (Jn 12:7). The next day, the Gospel tells us, Jesus entered Jerusalem to shouts of *“Hosanna!”*

The Church rearranges these events in its Great Week observance. It celebrates Christ’s entry into Jerusalem the day after Lazarus Saturday, stressing the connection of Christ’s exuberant reception in Jerusalem with the raising of Lazarus. It defers the memorial of the anointing to the Wednesday of Great Week, the day that we are anointed in preparation for sharing in Christ’s passion.

In the Gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus and Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem are connected. We read that Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb at some time before His final trip to Jerusalem (see *Jn 12:1*). Yet the same Gospel points out that: *“...the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of his tomb and raised him from the dead, bore witness. For this reason the people also met Him, because they heard that He had done this sign”* (*Jn 12:17-18*).

Jesus’ return to Bethany sparks the triumphal reception which Jesus received to the excitement over the raising of Lazarus.

Our liturgical hymns take up this connection:

*“The Lord comes, seated upon the colt of a donkey, as it is written. O peoples, make ready to receive Him in awe as the King of all, and to welcome Him with palms as Victor over Death and Hades; for He has raised Lazarus!”*

Each day of this week brings us closer to the commemoration of Lazarus’ rising. Thus on Monday we pray:

*“The door of the forecourt is opened that leads to the raising of Lazarus: for Christ has come to awaken the dead man, as though from sleep, and to overthrow Death by Life.”*

At Orthros on Tuesday we sing a similar hymn:

*“Be glad, Bethany! For Christ shall come to you, performing in you a great and awesome miracle. Binding death with fetters, as God He will raise up Lazarus, who was dead, and who now magnifies the Creator.”*

On Wednesday, four days before we celebrate Lazarus’ rising, we remember his death:

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“Lazarus, the friend of Christ, has died today: he is carried out for burial, and Martha’s companions lament in sorrow for her brother. But Christ comes to him in joy, to show the nations that He is Himself the Life of all.”

This hymn sung on Thursday adds another note for our consideration:

“For two days Lazarus has been in the tomb and sees those dead from all generations. He beholds strange and awesome things and a countless multitude held within the powers of Death. Looking at his tomb, his relatives weep bitterly; but Christ is on His way to give life to His friend and to consummate His plan for all mankind. Blessed are You, O Savior: have mercy on us!”

The plan of God is not simply to revive Lazarus, but to deliver the human race – that “countless multitude” – from the power of Death.

### **The Saturday of Lazarus**

*Hebrews 12:28-13:8 – John 11:1-45*

The celebration of Lazarus’ rising is based on the Gospel story of that event (Jn 11). The hymns of the feast point to its meaning for us as the Church has understood it:

- *The raising of Lazarus was to prepare the disciples – and us – for Jesus’ death and resurrection.* “O Lord, in Your desire to assure Your disciples about Your resurrection from the dead, You came to the tomb of Lazarus.”
- *The raising of Lazarus also prepared Death for its ultimate defeat.* As we pray at compline, “Even before Your crucifixion You made Death tremble before You, O Savior.”
- *The raising of Lazarus provides us with an assurance of our own ultimate resurrection.* As we say repeatedly on this feast, “You confirmed the future resurrection of all” (troparion) by this event. Lazarus thus became “the prelude of salvation and rebirth” (Vespers) for all believers.

As with Palm Sunday, this feast is popularly celebrated with a focus on children. Many Greeks prepare a Lazarus-shaped bread distributed to the children with fruits and nuts as a feastday treat. In Cyprus, Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East, children go from house to house singing carols. They reenact the raising of Lazarus for which they are suitably rewarded.

### **Resuscitation, not Resurrection**

Lazarus’ rising is thus an icon of Christ’s resurrection at Pascha and ours at the Last Day. Lazarus, however, was not raised to eternal life at this time. Rather he was brought back to the life of this world. According to St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (367-403), he lived for another thirty years or so. The Gospel asserts that Lazarus was a wanted man; “*The chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus*” (Jn 12:10-11). He is said to have fled the wrath of

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Christ's enemies for Cyprus where he helped Paul and Barnabas establish a church. Eventually he became Bishop of Kition (today's Larnaka) and died as a martyr in AD 63.

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As we complete these forty days of profit to our souls, let us exclaim: "Rejoice, O Bethany, birthplace of Lazarus." And you, his sisters, Mary and Martha, rejoice as well! For tomorrow, Christ will come and give life to your dead brother by a word. Bitter and insatiable Death will hear His voice; and trembling with fear and groaning bitterly, it will release Lazarus still wrapped in his shroud. The Hebrews, astonished at this miracle, come to meet Him, carrying branches and palms. And the children will rejoice to see the One on whom their fathers look with hate. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel!

*Vespers of Lazarus Saturday*

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## **Palm Sunday**

***Philippians 4:4-9 – John 12:1-18***

**"Like the Children of Old"**

FROM ARMENIA TO EVERY CORNER of the Middle East Palm Sunday is celebrated as a feast for children. Describing Christ's entry into Jerusalem, St Matthew's Gospel highlights the participation of children in the event. "*When the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He did and the children crying out in the temple and saying 'Hosanna to the Son of David' they were indignant and said to Him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' And Jesus said to them, 'Yes – have you never read 'Out of the mouths of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise?'"* (Mt 21:15-16)

Children are singled out for mention in the first historical witness we have to this feast as well. Towards the end of the fourth century the Spanish nun Egeria, on pilgrimage to the newly-adorned holy places of Palestine, described what she saw on that Palm Sunday: "As the eleventh hour draws near ... all the children who are [gathered at the top of the Mount of Olives], including those who are not yet able to walk because they are too young and therefore are carried on their parents' shoulders, all of them bear branches, some carrying palms, others, olive branches. And the bishop is led in the same manner as the Lord once was led. ... From the top of the mountain as far as the city and from there through the entire city ... everyone accompanies the bishop the whole way on foot, and this includes distinguished ladies and men of consequence." The scene Egeria witnessed has been repeated ever since.

While today this procession is held at the end of Orthros or the Divine Liturgy, Egeria describes it as taking place "at the eleventh hour," our 5 PM. This practice echoed the Gospel witness that "*Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So when He had looked around at everything, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the Twelve*" (Mk 11:11). There they spent the night.

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## **Children and the Church Today**

Palm Sunday services attract large numbers of families who may never attend the Liturgy otherwise. Many clergy blame negligent parents; others feel that the Church has not tried hard enough to reach these parents.

Some say that the Church spends too much effort educating children while ignoring adults. After all, they reason, the Lord blessed children but directed His teaching at adults.

Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, superior of Moscow's Stretensky Monastery offers another insight. He suggests that, instead of debating about whom we should teach, we should reexamine what we do with them. Are we emphasizing secondary matters when we should be introducing them to Christ? He writes:

“Children at the age of eight or nine go to church and sing on the kliros, amazing and delighting everyone around them. But by the age of fourteen to sixteen, many – if not the majority – stop going to church.

“Children have not become acquainted with God. No, they of course are acquainted with the rites, with Church Slavonic, with order in church, with the lives of saints, and with sacred history as arranged for children. But they are not acquainted with God Himself. No encounter has taken place. The result is that parents, Sunday schools and – sad as it is – priests have built the house of childhood faith *upon the sand* (Matthew 7:26), and not upon the rock of Christ.

“How can it happen that children do not notice God, despite all the most sincere efforts of adults to instill faith in them? How can it turn out that children still do not find within themselves the strength to discern Christ the Savior in their childhood lives and in the Gospel?

“When responding to this question, we raise yet another adult problem, one that is reflected in our children as in a mirror. This is when both parents and priests teach one thing, but live in another way. This is a most frightful blow to the tender strength of childhood faith, an unbearable drama for their sensitive minds.”

If children only come to church on Palm Sunday, is it because their elders – parents, relatives, adults around them – have not reflected to them their own encounter with the Lord themselves?

## **Our Holy Week and Jerusalem**

In 326-28 the Empress Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, traveled to Palestine at the behest of her son to mark the places where Christ lived and died by constructing shrines and churches. According to Eusebius of Caesarea she was chiefly responsible for two churches, the Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem (still in existence), and a church on the Mount of Olives, the site of Christ's ascension. Jerusalem. She also took part in the excavations at the site of the Lord's death and burial where the

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Great Church of the Resurrection stands today. It soon became the practice for great celebrations to take place at these sites, particularly when the events which took place there were observed. It was at these shrines that historical commemorations of the events of the Lord's passion were first conducted.

In time local Churches throughout the Mediterranean world began to imitate the appealing Jerusalem practices, developing the historical observances of Holy Week as we know them today.

### **The Power of the Redemption**

The first observances of Pascha in both East and West, however, were not attempts to recreate the events of the Lord's passion. Rather they were focused on the *effects* of the Lord's death and resurrection in the lives of the faithful. Thus the highpoint of the Resurrection celebration was *the baptism of catechumens*, which took place before the Paschal Liturgy, and *the reconciliation of penitents* on Holy Thursday: those whose serious sins had excluded them from the community. In the same spirit Byzantine Churches today offer the Mystery of Holy Unction on Holy Wednesday. People are anointed for the healing of their spiritual infirmities, uniting with Christ in the power of His death and resurrection.

### **On Celebrating This Feast**

In His humility Christ entered the dark regions of our fallen world and He is glad that He became so humble for our sake, glad that He came and lived among us and shared in our nature in order to raise us up again to Himself. And even though we are told that He has now ascended above the highest heavens – the proof, surely, of His power and godhead – His love for mankind will never rest until He has raised our earthbound nature from glory to glory, and made it one with His own in heaven.

So let us spread before His feet – not garments or soulless olive branches, which delight the eye for a few hours and then wither – but ourselves, clothed in His grace, or rather, clothed completely in Him. We who have been baptized into Christ must ourselves be the garments that we spread before Him. Now that the crimson stains of our sins have been washed away in the saving waters of baptism and we have become white as pure wool, let us present the Conqueror of death, not with mere branches of palms but with the real rewards of His victory. Let our souls take the place of the welcoming branches as we join today in the children's holy song: *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the king of Israel.*

St Andrew of Crete

### **The Great and Holy Week**

**“Behold, the Bridegroom Is Coming”**

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WHEN DOES A DAY BEGIN? The clock says that a new day starts at 12:01 AM, which most people see as the middle of the night. For others a new day begins when the sun rises and reveille (or the alarm clock) is sounded. The Eastern Churches follow the pattern set in the Book of Genesis: “*the evening and the morning were the first day*” (Gen 1:5). The liturgical day begins with Vespers and continues through the night. Matins (Orthros) at dawn followed by the hours and the Divine Liturgy complete the daily cycle of prayer, and the next day begins with vespers. Based on this pattern the Great and Holy Week begins at sunset, with Vespers, in the evening of Palm Sunday.

There are a great number of services appointed for this week: more than most parishes would schedule. A few important points should be noted about them:

- Fast Days – Every day of this week (including Saturday) is a fast day, as every day (except Holy Friday) is a Eucharistic day. Either the Presanctified Liturgy or the Liturgy of St Basil is celebrated at vespers. Holy Friday is a strict (i.e. day-long) fast in memory of Christ’s saving death.
- “Anticipation” – While the praying day begins in the evening and continues through the night, the average parish has only one service, in the early hours of the evening. In some parishes this is Vespers; in others it is Matins, anticipating the morning’s observance. When the morning service (Matins) is anticipated the previous evening, the evening service (Vespers) is often anticipated the previous morning!
- Focus of these services – Some of these services are “thematic”: focusing on the meaning of the Paschal Mystery in our lives. These include the reconciliation of penitents, holy unction and the baptism of catechumens. Other services are historical, focusing on the events of this week in Christ’s life: the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and His burial. These historical services became popular after shrines were erected in Jerusalem in the time of St Constantine the Great (fourth century). Today several of our services combine both thematic and historical aspects.

***Holy Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday*** – The Gospel story of Christ’s teaching in the temple during these days is read at each Matins and Presanctified Liturgy.

The troparion sung on these days is based on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (see Mt 25:1-13), particularly appropriate for this time: “Behold the Bridegroom is coming in the middle of the night – blessed is the servant He shall find awake! But the one He shall find neglectful will not be worthy of Him. Beware, therefore, O my soul. Do not fall into a deep slumber lest you be delivered to death and the doors of the kingdom be closed on you. Watch instead and cry out, ‘Holy holy, holy are You, O our God...’”

This parable is such a powerful image of the Paschal Mystery that the services themselves are popularly called “Bridegroom matins” or “Bridegroom Services” and the icon of Christ displayed for veneration on these days is called “the Bridegroom.”

### **The Wedding and the Bridegroom**

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When we think of weddings we think almost exclusively of the bride. In Western churches the bride appears with great ceremony and the groom merely joins her at the last moment. Among first century Jews it was very different and it is their practice that we see reflected in Scripture and in our Holy Week observance.

A Jewish marriage of the time consisted of two parts. There was the betrothal in which the bride's father agreed to the marriage and the marriage covenant was established. The man and woman were considered committed to one another but did not yet live together.

There followed a time of preparation: the bride was prepared to take on the role of a wife. She was kept apart to safeguard her purity and be trained in the conduct befitting a wife. For his part the groom devoted himself to preparing a dwelling place – usually in his father's house – where they would live. When the time was right the groom would come with great ceremony to claim his wife and bring her to their new home. *“And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’”* (Mt 25:6)

This practice is outlined in the Gospel portrayal of Mary and Joseph: *“After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife...’”* (Mt 1:18-20).

We also see similar imagery both in Scripture and the liturgy concerning our relationship with Christ the Bridegroom. According to St Paul, the Christian has been pledged to Christ. Like their father he tells the Corinthians: *“I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ”* (2 Cor 11:2). Christ speaks of Himself in similar terms when He says: *“In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you”* (Jn 14:2).

Our betrothal and time of preparation are mirrored in the Great Fast. At its beginning the catechumens professed their faith (their betrothal). With them the devoted faithful purified themselves during those forty days, preparing to unite with Christ at Pascha. Then, as the Bridegroom takes His own by the hand and leads them to their new homeland, we will sing *“O Jerusalem rejoice... for you have seen Christ the King coming out of the tomb as fair as a bridegroom”* (Paschalia).

### **Holy Unction – The Seal on Our Repentance**

DURING THE FORTY DAYS of the Great Fast the Church urges us to ascetic effort as a preparation for the observances of Holy Week and Pascha. We know that, by His death

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and resurrection, Christ has achieved the restoration of our human nature in Himself and has enabled us to share in His victory over sin and death by baptism.

Like Adam in the resurrection icon, Christ has taken us by the hand to draw us from the pit of spiritual death. But we know that, like Adam, our feet are still in the grave. It takes a lifelong process of ascetical effort to keep us joined to the redeeming hand of Christ and emerge from the tomb.

The seal on our Lenten striving is participation in the holy mysteries. Earlier in the Church's life those who were repenting of serious sins were excluded from the Eucharist during the Fast and reconciled to the Church in Holy Week. The Armenian and Maronite Churches still observe the reconciliation of penitents during this week, celebrating in deed as well as word the forgiveness won by the death of Christ.

In the Byzantine Churches the sacramental climax of our Lenten asceticism is the Mystery of Holy Unction. Anointing the sick was practiced by the apostles during the lifetime of Christ (see Mk 6:13) and by the Church in the apostolic age (see Jas 5:14-15). There are occasional references to this mystery in some of the Fathers but the specific practice only reached its present form after the fourteenth century.

Conferring this mystery on the whole congregation seems to have come about in response to the plagues which struck Constantinople eleven times in the fourteenth century. Then the whole city – and ultimately much of Europe and Asia – seemed to be in danger of death. General anointing services were held to help all the people of the capital in these times of crisis.

The Church has always spoken of spiritual and physical sickness in the same breath. Our misplaced strivings for “life” (greed, lust, power, and the rest) have the opposite effect, doing damage to our bodies as well as our spirits. Thus prayers for healing often join intercession for spiritual as well as bodily health.

It should not strike us as odd that the mystery of Holy Unction replaced the reconciliation of penitents as the sacramental seal on the Great Fast. We may not be in need of reconciliation after committing serious sins, but our broken human nature is always in need of healing. Since the Wednesday of the Great Week includes the memorial of Christ's anointing by Mary, the sister of Lazarus, in Bethany six days before the Passover (see Jn 12:1-8), it became the customary day for offering this mystery to those preparing for Pascha.

### **Confronting Our Infirmities**

In the “Trisagion Prayers,” which occur in many of our services, we pray the following: “All-holy Trinity, have mercy on us; Lord, forgive our sins; Master overlook our

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transgressions; Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities for Your name's sake." In this prayer we affirm that we commit *sins* (deliberate rejections of what we know to be God's way) and also *transgressions* (unrecognized or intended offenses). Many people say that if you didn't mean it, then it's not a sin. True, but does that then mean I am not responsible? The children whose ball breaks their neighbor's window didn't mean it, but the window is still broken; is no one responsible? The godly person accepts responsibility for transgressions as well as sins.

The prayer continues by requesting healing for *infirmities*, and it is here that the mystery of Holy Unction is important in our Christian life. Whenever we strive to deal with our passions, as during the Great Fast, we discover how unable we are to live God's way by our own power. We need to throw ourselves at Christ's feet and implore Him as did the blind man on the roadside, "*Son of David, have mercy on me*" (Mt 9:27). It is with this disposition that receiving Holy Unction bears the most fruit.

### **Exploring the Service**

In its fullest form, the Holy Unction service consists of two parts. The first is a kind of paraklisis or moleben in which we read psalms and sing troparia along with a canon and stikhera seeking God's help:

"The whole earth is filled with Your mercy, O Master. Therefore we, who are anointed today with Your precious and divine oil, entreat You with faith that Your mercy beyond understanding be granted to us." (from Ode One).

"With the tranquility of Your mercy, O Master, seal the senses of Your servants, making impassible and inaccessible the entrance of all adverse powers" (from Ode Four).

"Your seal is a sword against demons, O Savior, and the prayers of Your priests are fire burning the passions of the soul. Therefore we who are receiving healing faithfully sing Your praises" (from Ode Seven).

In the second part of the service oil is brought forth and, in some Churches, mixed with wine to recall the similar mixture used by the Good Samaritan in Christ's parable (see Lk 10:25-37). The oil is blessed; then seven prayers are read, each with an epistle and Gospel. These prayers are offered by seven priests in succession, a reminder of the time when people would be anointed seven days in a row, each day by a different priest. In practice the service may be conducted with as few as one priest and one set of prayers and readings.

At the final prayer the assisting clergy hold the open Gospel book over the head of the people while the presiding priest prays, "I do not lay my sinful hand on the heads of those who come to You in sins, asking for the remission of sins through us, but Your mighty and powerful hand, which is in this, Your holy Gospel...Accept Your servants who are repenting of their sins, overlooking their transgressions."

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The priest then anoints the people on the forehead and hands (and sometimes on other parts of the body) saying, “Holy Father, Physician of souls and bodies, forgive, heal and save Your servant” or simply “For the healing of soul and body.”

### **A Communal Rite**

From its beginnings in the apostolic Church, Holy Unction has always been a solemn and communal rite, rather than a private prayer, even when the recipient is seriously ill. Thus the Byzantine practice of having seven priests officiate hearkens back to St James’ injunction, *“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven”* (Jas 5:14-15).

Even when a parish priest goes to anoint a sick parishioner he does well to take some of the un-ordained “elders” of the community along to offer their prayers and encouragement to their ill neighbor. In some parishes groups of people have been trained to accompany the priest on these occasions and to pray the mystery together, showing the sick that they are not alone in their time of trial and assuring them of the love of Christ at a most important time in their life.