

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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April 6, 2014 ₩
St. Mary of Egypt
Fifth and Final Sunday of Lent

St. Methodius, Bishop of Moravia, Enlightener of the Slavs (885) St. Gregory Drimys of Great Lavra, Instructor of St. Gregory Palamas (1326)

St. Sebastian, Elder of Optina and Karaganda (1966)



Sixth and Final Week of Great Lent

- Tues. April 8 6:30pm Inquirer's Class
- ₩ Wed. April 9 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy
- Fri. April 11 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy of Lazarus



Holy Week 2014 Schedule

- **▼** Sat. April 12 10:00am Lazarus Saturday Divine Liturgy
 - > Parish Workday following Divine Liturgy



- ¥ Sun. April 13 Palm Sunday Matins & Divine Liturgy (8:30am)
- ₩ Palm Sunday Evening 5:00pm ~ First Bridegroom Matins
- ₩ April 14/15 Holy Monday & Tuesday ~ 6:30pm Bridegroom Matins
- ► April 16 Holy Wednesday 6:30pm Holy Unction
- **April 17 Holy Thursday 10:00am Mystical Supper Liturgy** 6:30pm 12 Passion Gospels
- ¥ Holy Friday Services ¥ April 18 10:00am Royal Hours

4:00pm Vespers - Shroud to the Tomb / 7:00pm - Lamentations at the Tomb

+ Youth All Night Vigil at the Tomb +

- ₩ Holy Saturday ~ April 19 ~ 10:00am Divine Liturgy The Blessed Sabbath
 - **▼** Holy PASCHA **▼** Begins Saturday, April 19 at 11:30pm
 - ▼ Pascha Sunday April 20 ~ 3:00pm Paschal Agape Vespers
 - ➡ Bright Monday April 21 ~ 10:00am Divine Liturgy w/ Procession
 - Your Help Needed on the Saturday workday! Cleaning floors, carpets, windows and outside work also, plus Palm Sunday decorating! The more workers we have, the more we can get done – pretty simple.
 - > THIS WEEK Father seeking help for pussy willow prep.
 - > Adult commitments are needed for the Holy Friday Night Vigil at the Tomb.



St. Basil the Great on Fasting

"The table is more charming after fasting"

Fasting is an opportunity for happiness. After all, just as thirst makes drinking pleasurable and hunger before a meal makes eating it pleasurable, so too fasting enhances the enjoyment of food when it is partaken. For when fasting has interposed itself as a moderator and interrupted your continual self-indulgence, it will show you that eating is desired so long as it is postponed. Accordingly, if you wish to prepare yourself a table that arouses desire, accept the change introduced by fasting.

But because you are overly attached to self-indulgence, you have failed to notice that you make self-indulgence banal to yourself and destroy its pleasure by love of pleasure. For while there is nothing so desirable that it does not become loathsome through continual enjoyment, what is taken rarely is enjoyed quite eagerly. Thus he who created us has made the grace of his gifts endure amidst the changes of this life.

Don't you realize that the sun is more enjoyable after the night? That waking is more pleasurable after sleep? That health is more appreciated after the experience of the contrary? So too is the table more charming after fasting: this diet is equally valid for the rich with a sumptuous spread as it is for the poor who eat whatever is near at hand.

Our Victorious Leader

+ The Word became flesh of the Virgin Mary. The flesh of the Virgin is also the flesh that is nailed to the Cross (when her soul was itself mysteriously pierced). The flesh which we eat in the Eucharist is also the flesh of the Virgin – for there is no flesh of God that is not the flesh of the Virgin. And it does no good to protest that the Word merely "took flesh" of the Virgin. For Adam cried out concerning Eve, "This is truly bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." And St. Paul noted concerning the wife of a man that a man should love her, "For no one ever yet hated his own flesh."

I puzzle at how Christians who understand that it is wrong for a woman to say, "It's my body and I can do with it what I want," when she is carrying a child, can at the same time treat the Mother of God as though she had merely lent her womb to God for a period of time.

~ Fr. Stephen Freeman

+ "Guard yourself from thoughts, which appear holy and inflame an unreasonable zeal for themselves, of which the Lord speaks allegorically: 'Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. You shall know them by their fruits' (Mt. 7:15-16). Their fruit is the languishing and breaking of the spirit. Know that everything which draws you away from humility and from inner peace and quiet, however beautiful it may seem, is nothing but false prophets who, under the cover of sheep's clothing, that is, of a hypocritical zeal to do good to their neighbors without discrimination, are in truth ravening wolves who steal you of your humility, peace and quiet, so necessary to every man who desires steady progress in spiritual life."

Unseen Warfare, p.261

+ "Faith is the key of God's treasury. She dwells in simple, kind, loving hearts. `All things are possible to him that believeth.' Faith is a spiritual mouth, the more freely it opens the greater the stream by which the Divine springs enter into it; let this mouth freely open, as your bodily one does; do not let your lips be compressed by doubt and unbelief: if you compress them by doubt and unbelief, the treasury of God's blessings will be closed to you. The more openly, the more heartily you believe in God's omnipotence, the more bountifully will God's heart be opened to you. `What things so ever ye desire, when ye pray believe that ye receive them and ye shall have them."

St. John of Kronstadt

St. Mary of Egypt - April 1 and the Fifth Sunday of Lent

St. Mary of Egypt lived in the middle of the fifth century and at the beginning of the sixth century. Her youth did not presage anything good. Mary was twelve years old when she left her home for the city of Alexandria. Being free of parental oversight, young and inexperienced, Mary was allured by a life of depravity. There was no one to stop her on the way to perdition, and there were not a few temptations. Thus, for seventeen years Mary lived in sin, until the merciful Lord turned her to repentance.

It happened thus. By coincidence, Mary joined a group of pilgrims bound for the Holy Land. While sailing with the pilgrims on the ship, Mary did not cease from seducing men and sinning. On getting to Jerusalem, she joined the pilgrims who were heading for the Church of Christ's Resurrection.

People were entering the church in a large throng, but Mary was stopped at the entrance by an invisible hand and could not by any efforts enter it. Here she understood that the Lord was not permitting her to enter into the holy place because of her impurity.

Seized by horror and a feeling of profound repentance, she began to entreat God to forgive her sins, promising to radically correct her life. Seeing an icon of the Mother of God at the entrance of the church, Mary began to beg the Divine Mother to plead for her before God. After this, she immediately felt a clearing up in her soul and entered the church unhindered. Having poured out abundant tears at the Lord's Tomb, she went out of the church a completely different person.

Mary fulfilled her promise to change her life. From Jerusalem, she withdrew into the harsh and barren Jordanian Desert, and there spent almost half a century in complete solitude, in fasting and prayer. Thus, by severe ascetic feats, Mary of Egypt completely eradicated in herself all sinful desires and made her heart a pure temple of the Holy Spirit.

The Elder Zosimas, who lived in the Jordanian Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, was deemed worthy, by God's providence, to meet Venerable Mary in the desert, when she was already an old woman. He was struck by her holiness and gift of clairvoyance. He saw her once during prayer as if raised up above the earth, and another time walking over the River Jordan, as if on dry land.

In parting with Father Zosimas, Venerable Mary asked him to come again to the desert in a year to give her Communion. The Elder returned at the appointed time and gave Venerable Mary Communion of the Holy Mysteries. Then, when he went into the desert after another year in the hope of seeing the Saint, he did not find her among the living.

The Elder buried the remains of Venerable Mary there in the desert. In this a lion helped him, who dug a hole with his claws for burying the body of the righteous one. She died in the year 521.

Thus, from a great sinner, Venerable Mary became, with God's help, a very great Saint and left such a striking example of repentance. Her memory is marked on the 1st of April (according to the Church calendar) and on the Fifth Sunday of Great Lent. St. Mary, pray to God for us! +

Eucharist, and never cease to wonder at the miraculous mystery of it, reflecting on how God manifests Himself to you in the guise of bread and wine, and becomes essentially present in you, to make you more holy, righteous and blessed. For blessed are they who do not see, yet believe; according to the words of the Savior (cf. Jn. 20:29). Try to set alight in yourself a warm desire for this sacrament and to make progress every day both in your fervent readiness to do only God's will, and in spiritual wisdom, making it the queen and ruler over all your actions of the spirit, the soul and the body. Every time you take communion, while partaking of this bloodless sacrifice, offer yourself as a sacrifice to God, that is, profess your complete readiness to endure every affliction, every sorrow and every wrong you may meet in the course of your life, for the sake of the love of God, Who sacrificed Himself for us."

from Unseen Warfare

Lazarus Saturday

Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary, the friends of the Lord Jesus, had given Him hospitality and served Him many times (Luke 10:38; John 12:2-3). They were from Bethany, a village of Judea. This village is situated in the eastern parts by the foothills of the Mount of Olives, about two Roman miles from Jerusalem. When Lazarus - whose name is a Hellenized form of "Eleazar," which means "God has helped," became ill some days before the saving Passion, his sisters had this report taken to our Savior, Who was then in Galilee. Nonetheless, He tarried yet two more days until Lazarus died; then He said to His disciples, "Let us go into Judea that I might awake My friend who sleepeth." By this, of course, He meant the deep sleep of death. On arriving at Bethany, He consoled the sisters of Lazarus, who was already four days dead. Jesus groaned in spirit and was troubled at the death of His beloved friend. He asked, "Where have ye laid his body?" and He wept over him. When He drew nigh to the tomb, He commanded that they remove the stone, and He lifted up His eyes, and giving thanks to God the Father, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." And he that had been dead four days came forth immediately, bound hand and foot with the grave clothes, and Jesus said to those standing there, "Loose him, and let him go." This is the supernatural wonder wrought by the Savior that we celebrate on this day. According to an ancient tradition, it is said that Lazarus was thirty years old when the Lord raised him; then he lived another thirty years on Cyprus and there reposed in the Lord. It is furthermore related that after he was raised from the dead, he never laughed till the end of his life, but that once only, when he saw someone stealing a clay vessel, he smiled and said, "Clay stealing clay." His grave is situated in the city of Kition, Cyprus, having the inscription: "Lazarus the four days dead and friend of Christ." In 890 his sacred relics were transferred to Constantinople by Emperor Leo the Wise, at which time undoubtedly the Emperor composed his stichera for Vespers, "Wishing to behold the tomb of Lazarus . . . "

Force yourselves in your spiritual duties, for forcefulness in spiritual things is like a solid wall that does not let the river run into the garden and destroy what the gardener has labored to grow. But if we are negligent, the river comes in and destroys everything!

The Lord speaks to us about this in the Holy Gospel: "While the men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat." (Mt. 13:25). The more we compel ourselves, the more we shall gain. The more one works, the more he is paid.

Elder Ephraim

- Fasting is the champion of every virtue, the beginning of the struggle, the crown of the abstinent, the beauty of virginity and sanctity, the resplendence of chastity, the commencement of the path of Christianity, the mother of prayer, the well-spring of sobriety and prudence, the teacher of stillness, and the precursor of all good works. Just as the enjoyment of light is coupled with healthy eyes, so desire for prayer accompanies fasting that is practiced with discernment.

 St. Isaac the Syrian
- He that fasts is light, and winged, and prays with wakefulness, and quenches his wicked lusts, and propitiates God, and humbles his soul when lifted up. Therefore even the apostles were almost always fasting. He that prays with fasting hath his wings double, and lighter than the very winds. ... For nothing is mightier than a man who prays sincerely... But if thy body be too weak to fast continually, still it is not too weak for prayer, nor without vigor for contempt of the belly. For although thou canst not fast, yet canst thou avoid luxurious living.

St. John Chrysostom (+407)

REPENTANCE: LIFE'S CONTINUAL EFFORT

Bishop Ignaty Brianchaninov left us the following precious instruction: "In order to live spiritually and draw breath from grace, we must continually exhale the ashes of sin." We sin almost constantly, if not in our deeds, then in our thoughts and feelings. Therefore it is essential to continually cleanse our souls. In the language of asceticism (teaching on religious struggle) it is known as "internal activity" or "attentiveness." To continually repent is to pay unceasing attention to one's spiritual life, to assess and remove from it all that is questionable and foolish. Bishop Theophanes the Recluse teaches us that one should do battle with sin at the moment it is born, i.e. when it is only in one's thoughts. This is true battle, the "invisible warfare" as it is called by the Athonite struggler Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain. This spiritual battle requires ability, God's assistance, and constant prayer. As the holy Fathers of the Church write "It is pointless to weep over the sins of the past if we do not struggle with them in the present." Continual repentance or attentiveness is that poverty of spirit of which Christ speaks in the first Beatitude in His sermon on the mount. The call to such repentance is found throughout the Word of God and the texts of Orthodox worship.

In a sense, all of the teaching of the Church is a single call to repentance in the most profound sense of that term, i.e. it is a call to rebirth, to a complete reassessment of all values, to a new understanding and vision of life in the light of Christ.

It was not coincidentally that St. John the Baptist often repeated the words "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The Christ began His sermon with these same words. According to the Venerable St. Ephraim the Syrian, "repentance is a field to be cultivated at all times. "Repentance is the tree of life, resurrecting those dead in sin." Elsewhere he states, "Through repentance, earth has become heaven, for it has become filled with saints."

In his book A Priest's Observations, Fr. Alexander Elchaninov, an experienced spiritual director, writes, "Without our constant control over the spirit, confession, which takes place occasionally, is not successful. The eye of the spirit, conscience, demands exercise, and without it you will see neither yourself nor your sins. According to the Venerable St. Isaac of Syria, "He who has been able to see himself has accomplished more than one who has seen the angels." He also wrote "One who apprehends his sin is better than one who through his prayers raises the dead."

Sts. Ephraim and Isaac, and other spiritual strugglers after piety all recommend that in doing battle with sin, it is best to begin with the sin which most grievously attacks us. To the extent that we are rid of it, our conscience will see all the more. Moreover, it always behooves Christians to do battle against those sins which directly oppose love. The holy fathers of the Church teach that hatred, enmity, and condemnation utterly seal shut the gates of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of love. Thus, the first condition of true repentance is reconciliation with everyone. This is why in the Lord's Prayer, the Christ included the words "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." This is why the Orthodox Church begins Great Lent with Forgiveness Sunday, when believers ask forgiveness of one another for personal insults and offenses, so that with a clear conscience they might begin Lent, their "invisible warfare." The Church teaches that true love is indivisible, and that dislike for a single person will ultimately poison all love. Theophanes the Recluse writes: "In one who is at odds with anyone else, all friendship is fragile, and easily turns into enmity; of course, by bearing enmity, one cannot really love God. God is complete love, and tolerates nothing that

REPENTANCE: LIFE'S CONTINUAL EFFORT

is opposed to love."

The commandments in the Gospel, while easy, appear difficult, for human consciousness, having fallen out of synch with life and harmony, is clouded. For example, people consider the Gospel commandment to love friend and enemy alike, to be difficult. In the sermon on the mount, the Lord says: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). We see that no limits to good are imposed upon man in this commandment, one given to those who wish to rise above both their own and mankind's selfishness, to be healed, and to depart from the state of sin.

Let us try to list those who have caused us some annoyance or insult, who have dealt with us poorly or spoken ill of us. In other words, let us recall those who are "not to our liking" and, forgiving each of them, let us sincerely pray for these souls. Let us drive out any grudge or irritation we bear them, and wish them well. Given the opportunity, let us say something nice about them to others. At every opportunity, let us help them.

Thus, as we will see for ourselves, fulfilling the commandment of love will engender a joyous feeling of spiritual freedom and profound peace. Many internal difficulties will depart from us, for we will have <u>fulfilled</u> the Christ's words, believed in God, and given Him heed. The power of good will rejoice within us. Even if we do not immediately notice this peace within ourselves, it will certainly come to us as a reflection of our charity.

That a person is kind, honest, and generous always seems miraculous. Yes, it is a miracle, and a miracle far greater than moving a mountain. Something greater than a mountain is being moved - human selfishness. Such is the effect on man of our faith in God, our trust in the Lord, our repentance before Christ. When one who hates becomes one who loves, when a liar becomes truthful, when a vain person becomes modest, it is truly a miracle. Charity emanating from us first of all liberates us from our own evil; it opens within us the doors and windows through which flows the pure air of heaven. This is the rebirth born of repentance.

In repentance we see the operation not of natural forces but of supernatural grace-filled ones. And only one who believes in the Light can take into himself true love. According to biological law, men engag only in a "struggle for survival." But according to the law of the Spirit, the battle is for the resurrection of the world, a spiritual battle which conquers selfishness, spiritual death. The Christ calls us to overcome our evil will and animal nature, to become human in the full spiritual sense of the term. The human soul is immeasurably greater than matter. As the Apostle Paul tells the Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Such great, marvelous words: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Through the faith granted us, we are called to be centered internally, mentally, not on our little selfish personality, but on the power of the Living God, the True Christ Jesus Who dwells in us.

The Creator and Father who brought us into being granted to our souls the freedom to make a free moral choice, to turn to Him and to repent of our sins, which constitute a betrayal of God's truth. Yes, man is sometimes unfaithful to God; even if we do not frankly renounce God, we sometimes obliquely become betrayers of Christ, of His love and truth. Let us all repent of that.

Let us reflect upon how imperfect is our consciousness, and let us repent before God. Through repentance, the pure path to God is opened. Moreover, let us not tarry, for no one knows when his final hour will come. There is nothing more important and more needed than repentance and God's saving forgiveness.

Archpriest V. Potapov (Parish Life March, 1998)

"Running with Patience the Race Set Before Us": Asceticism and the Spiritual Life Fr. Alexis Trader, April 14, 2013

Lent is referred to so often as a journey that it has almost become a cliché. Probably, the word marathon would be more descriptive, for the ascetic life that Lent encourages the faithful to embrace calls us to move a significant distance and at quick, but steady speed. There are times when the way ahead may seem discouragingly far. There are times when we would rather walk leisurely, than run, but as bearers of the Gospel, we have a message... that in Christ we can be transformed, that in Christ we can move mountains, that in Christ we can "run with patience the race set before us." If we are not running, if we are not climbing, it is indeed time to begin, for stagnation in the spiritual life means the absence of the spiritual life. It means that "we are to repent" and begin while there is still time. Metropolitan Philaret talks about the spiritual life in terms of ascending like a stone thrown in the air: "When we throw a stone up, it ascends until the moment when the propelling force ceases to be effectual. So long as this force acts, the stone travels higher and higher in its ascent, overcoming the force of the earth's gravity. But when this force is spent and ceases to act, then, as you know, the stone does not remain suspended in the air. Immediately, it begins to fall, and the further it falls the greater the speed of its fall. This, solely according to the physical laws of terrestrial gravity. So it is also in the spiritual life. As a Christian gradually ascends. the force of spiritual and ascetical labors lifts him on high. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: 'Strive to enter in through the narrow gate.' That is, the Christian ought to be an ascetic. Not only the monastic, but every Christian. He must take pains for his soul and his life. He must direct his life on the Christian path, and purge his soul of all filth and impurity. Now, if the Christian, who is ascending upon this ladder of spiritual perfection by his struggles and ascetic labors, ceases from this work and ascetic toil, his soul will not remain in its former condition; but, like the stone, it will fall to the earth. More and more quickly will it drop until, finally, if the man does not come to his senses, it will cast him down into the very abyss of Hell." Ascetic labor is to the spiritual life as running is to a

Ascetic labor is to the spiritual life as running is to a marathon. All who have taken on the easy yoke of Christ are called to asceticism and not only

monastics. This is so clear in the universal celebration of Saint John of the Ladder. He is not just an instructor for monks, but for all Christians. The Ladder is a blueprint not only for monks struggling with the passions, but for everyone struggling to attain unto the likeness of Christ.

As we move closer to Pascha, the struggle becomes more intense and the Church reminds us that those who will attain eternal life in communion with God will be those who struggled consistently and those who repented wholeheartedly. This is the "narrow gate" of which our Lord speaks in the Gospel. There is no other salvific path.

The ascetical struggle of Great Lent is often experienced with mixed feelings, with joyfulsorrow, with sorrow for running unworthily, with sorrow for stumbling on the way, with sorrow for being so far behind those swift runners of the Spirit, but with joy for God loves even the unworthy, with joy for when we stumble, God can raise us up, and with joy for those swift runners of the Spirit are our friends who make clear the way for us to follow. Our struggle is a marathon, but not a depressing Sysyphean struggle that goes nowhere. The ascesis of Great Lent is borne of love by one who has already experienced God's superabundant love. The ascetical labor is not taken on out of duty but from a love that knows no bounds. It is a joyful sorrow in that one recognizes his own sinfulness and distance from the One who has ignited a spark of love in his soul. It is a struggle that is assumed lovingly, cheerfully, and most importantly, willingly. For those who engage in this struggle, life takes on new meaning. Life itself becomes precious in that affords the struggler time for repentance. In this struggle, God comforts and heals. He opens the eyes of the one blinded by sin so that all creation is seen as the handiwork of a loving God. At the end of our journey, may we echo the words of St. John of the Ladder, "Enlighten us, quench our thirst, guide us, take us by the hand; for we wish at last to soar to Thee. Thou rulest over all. And now Thou hast ravished my soul. I cannot contain Thy Flame. So I will go on praising Thee. Thou rulest the power of the sea, and stillest the surge of its waves and puttest it to death. Thou hast humbled the proud man as the corpse of one slain. With the arm of Thy power hast Thou scattered Thine enemies, and Thou has made Thy lovers invincible."

Eldress Gavrilia on the Importance of Fasting

Question: Mother, what could you tell us about fasting?

Answer: Fasting is one of our greatest weapons against the evil one. I will repeat what Fr. Lazarus (Moore) told me once. In 1962 I went to the USA. I stayed there a long time and traveled to many states. The letters of Fr. Lazarus were a great help. He was my spiritual guide and I am most grateful to him for the valuable letters he wrote to me at times, wherever I went. He used to say, "Go anywhere you like, do whatever you like, as long as you observe fasting."

Question: Why's that, Mother?

Answer: Because not a single arrow of the evil one can reach you when you fast. Never.

Question: You mean Wednesdays and Fridays.

Answer: Not only that; all fast days and periods.

Question: What were you eating then?

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Answer: It was the fast of the first two weeks in August, and there they kept a good table with all sorts of non-fasting delicacies. But for me, a tomato juice and some stewed fruit were more than enough - every day for the entire fast.

Question: Mother, as you have just said, by fasting we are safe from the arrows of the evil one. Does this happen because the soul is left free for spiritual nourishment? and viuh for

Answer: To begin with, fasting makes you forget about your body - the "What are we going to eat? What are we going to drink?" So when you don't pay attention to the body, you turn your attention to the spirit. And the spirit is blessed by God. It receives and accepts the grace of God. Then you can lead a life according to Christ, as we all wish our life to be, as we all wish to live our life. Fasting helps in all that. St. Basil the Great said that the basis for spiritual progress is the practice of temperance in all things. Our ancestors, too, had that famous saying, "A fat belly cannot breed a fine mind."

Question: This rule is for monastics. What about people who live in the world? A West

Answer: No, the rule is not only for monks and nuns. I was living in the world when Fr. Lazarus wrote me, with my professional activities, my physiotherapy practice, etc.

When We Look at Jesus on the Cross

The Orthodox Church has a profound awareness of the significance of the Cross, but this experience has never focused primarily on the pain suffered by Jesus. When we look at Jesus on the Cross, we see not so much a man in great pain, but something much more miraculous. There, on the Cross, we see Jesus in complete acceptance of the will of God. It is His surrender, total, focused, and voluntary, that elevated the terrible and life-destroying action of humanity into a divine moment of supreme victory for life and love and joy and peace. There is much about Jesus that would be impossible for us to emulate. However, His sense of presence is something we can at the very least attempt, particularly when we are standing in church. That presence is fueled by acceptance and ignited by complete surrender.

~ Archimandrite Meletios Webber, Bread, Water, Wine & Oil, p. 65