



## *Fire & Light*

### **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

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✠ April 7, 2013 ✠

### **Third Sunday of Lent**

#### **Sunday of the Cross**

St. Tikhon the Confessor, Patriarch of Moscow,

Enlightener of North America (+1925)

St. George the Confessor, Bishop of Mitylene (9<sup>th</sup> C)

What shall we offer Thee,  
O Christ?

For Thou hast given us Thy  
precious Cross to venerate:  
Where Thy holy blood was  
shed, and Thy flesh was fixed  
by nails!

We kiss it with love, giving  
thanks to Thee!

- Matins of the Cross

## **Fourth Week of Great Lent**

✠ Presanctified Liturgy: Wednesday, April 10, 6:30pm

✠ Presanctified Liturgy: Friday, April 12, 6:30pm

✠ **Baptism** – Saturday, April 13 – 3:00pm ~ Child Jesse Potts

Phillip Ritchey and Georgeta Lazarescu are the Godparents



### **The Cross**

"God is love and full of compassion. Let us not sadden Him in anything! He endured the Cross for us; His head was pricked by the crown of thorns; His side was pierced by the spear; His feet were nailed; His back was scourged; His all-holy mouth was given gall and vinegar; His heart ached for the insolence and ingratitude; He was naked upon the Cross in front of such a demonic mob. This, my children, is Whom we should not sadden with our carelessness, which intensifies His suffering. The Jews were His enemies, whereas we have been baptized in His holy Name - we are His disciples who are devoted to serving Him!"

Elder Ephraim of Philotheou

Elder Timothy of Kapsala, Mt. Athos (+1989):

When he lived in a cave near Saint Paul Monastery, the devil appeared to him one night and told him furiously: "If Christ wasn't crucified and if you didn't wear that cross, you should see what I would have done to you."

**Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, in his excellent book, Great Lent:**

"Man was created for Paradise, for knowledge of God and communion with Him. Man's sin has deprived him of that blessed life and his existence on earth is exile. Christ, the Savior of the world, opens the door of Paradise to everyone who follows Him, and the Church, by revealing to us the beauty of the Kingdom, makes our life a pilgrimage toward our heavenly fatherland."

## Wisdom of the Holy Fathers

✘ Without Confession, no one will obtain forgiveness. – **St. John of the Ladder**

✘ "An Elder, skilled in instruction, expressed the following opinion" 'However long you offer strands of material to Satan, he will weave ropes; for he is a rope-weaver' He meant by this one's thoughts: the more you pay attention to them - that is, accept them - the more they will multiply and tie themselves to you."  
**An unknown Elder**

✘ "A brother asked an Elder: 'My Father, how should the mind banish evil and unclean thoughts?' And the Elder replied: 'My child, it is not possible for the mind, entirely on its own, to accomplish such a thing, because it does not have that much power. When evil thoughts assault the soul, the soul must immediately take refuge in its Creator, persistently entreating Him to come unto its aid; whereupon He dissolves them at once, as wax is melted by fire.'"

✘ "The Devil is the enemy, and your soul is the abode that he seeks to defile. The Enemy, therefore, does not cease throwing within the abode of your soul whatever he can come up with --- littering it with every sort of filth. But you are responsible if you grow negligent and do not throw out the filth littered in your soul by the Devil. If you do not immediately attend to this work of cleansing, then the inner abode of your soul will be filled with every kind of filth; and no one will be able to enter and abide therein, on account of the unbearable stench. If, however, you straightway resolve to take out the first batch of filth the Devil throws in, then God, rewarding your intention, will preserve - in cleanliness, by His Grace - the inner abode of your soul."  
**An unknown Abba**

✘ No matter how much the frightening tyrant of our souls oppresses us out of envy and malice, the time will come for God to judge his malice and give eternal repose to us who are heavy-laden.  
**Elder Ephraim**

✘ **When one grows old**, he is given the opportunity to repent more readily; because the illusions are gone. While he still had his physical strength and his youth, he wasn't aware of his weaknesses; and imagined himself to be in a good spiritual state. But now that he has difficulties and is complaining, it helps him to realize that he is not all right-that he is weak; and this helps him repent. If he makes good use of the few years he has ahead, and uses his past years' experience as well, Christ will not abandon him; He will be merciful.  
**Elder Paisios (+1994)**

✘ "Whoever does not humbly accept a reproof or remark will be continually flogged by his egoism, laid into by other people, and pummeled by the devil --- who will fling him from one temptation to another, in order to make him indignant, even to the point of losing his soul. Therefore, we should accept criticism, even if we were not to blame at the time but were in the past, and were then compensated; or we were never to blame but God allowed it, that we might deposit a few cents in His eternal savings bank."  
**Elder Paisios**

✘ 'The mere entry of thoughts into our minds is not reprehensible. The misuse of thoughts is reprehensible. It is possible for a soul to be spiritually shipwrecked by thoughts, just as it is possible to be crowned victor (against them).' With this opinion, the holy Elder teaches us that we are able to quash a bad thought by opposing it; or even transform bad thoughts into good ones, having been given this opportunity by the opposing thoughts themselves."  
**Elder Paisios**

✘ Pray simply. Do not expect to find in your heart any remarkable gift of prayer. Consider yourself unworthy of it. Then you will find peace. Use the empty cold dryness of your prayer as food for your humility. Repeat constantly: I am not worthy; Lord, I am not worthy! But say it calmly, without agitation.  
**St. Macarius of Optina**

## The Lenten Observance

By + Archbishop Dmitri

"In the not too distant past, a minister of one of the denominations was quoted as saying: *"Almost no one in my Church observes Lent in the traditional way any longer. The people simply cannot find a place for fasting and self-denial in their current lifestyles. They are, however, attracted by the idea of a period of intensive sharing and helping others. This is what we are concentrating on in our Church nowadays. After all, isn't that what Lent is all about?"*

It is unfortunately true that what this minister says reflects a very popular attitude. There is just no place for Lent in the contemporary way of life, so some Churches have seen fit to adapt themselves to the "realities of modern life," skip the "empty ritual observances," and "make the spring preparation for Easter more meaningful" to their people. These platitudes dominate many discussions of the purpose of Lent

Still more unfortunate is the acceptance (sometimes without realizing it) by not a few American Orthodox of these notions. Perhaps in a country like ours where certain religious and semi-religious ideas fill the air, it is natural for people who do not think things through to be carried along by the trends. This is especially true when what is offered is less demanding

No one will question the fact that the Orthodox Christian Lenten observance is difficult. What is prescribed requires almost a super-human effort -- the dietary changes, the cessation of entertainments, the constant call to self-examination, the reminders of our need to turn away from this world and set our sight on God's Kingdom, the injunction to forgive and love even our enemies. It has little appeal to a society in which self-indulgence is no longer a sinful departure from God's will for man, but a philosophy of life. Orthodox people are inescapably members of such a society, and being Orthodox not just in name, but conscientiously, is really a deliberate rejection of most of what that society offers.

What is missing from so many discussions of Lent and what is of primary importance in the Orthodox concept, is the idea of *repentance*. In fact, the underlying idea of the Great Fast is exactly that, and the ritual observance is nothing more than a sign of it. By the way, the term *Great Fast* is still a better name for the period than *Lent*. We use the latter term, however, for ease of discussion, for fear that many of our own people would not know what we are talking about if we used the other one.

Actually, by rejecting traditional Lenten disciplines, what society and some of its obedient churches and churchmen are implicitly rejecting is the very idea of repentance, because repentance means a change of mind, of direction, of one's way of life, of values. These changes which must come from the heart, arise from a conviction that one does not live as God would have him live. They would not appeal to a self-satisfied and basically self-righteous society. And a society which is convinced that it is good and has no sin to be sorry for is just that, self-righteous.

The radical change of diet that is called for, is a sign of a radical change of lifestyle to which the Christian Faith calls us, even if it means running the risk of being 'odd' to those we work and associate with. The increase in church attendance (*during Lent*) is an indication of the Christian's longing to be with God, in His house, and with His people. The sharing with and the helping of others, an enormously important part of the observance, is not just a response to some humanitarian concerns, but a response to Christ's new commandment to love one another. All of these characteristics of the Fast are intimately bound together and interdependent. A mere outward observance of these things without the change of heart that they signify, is useless.

The Church is calling her faithful people once again to the observance of the Great Fast. Nothing has changed. Even if someone, moved by a false feeling of compassion for the people, should try to 'lighten the load' and make it easier by reducing the requirements, he is fooling himself and those who follow him. The ideal is still the same -- in this world in which we live -- being in it, yet not of it, as the Lord has characterized His followers. We shall be invited to come back to God, overcome all obstacles so that the One we see is Jesus, to overcome self-righteousness, to repent of our sins against God and against our fellow man, and to make our lives models of self-giving, sharing, and forgiveness -- in a word, of love -- love of God and of our neighbor."

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***Members one of another...***

*"I want you to know this, that Jesus Christ our Lord is Himself the true Mind of the Father. By Him all the fullness of every rational nature is made in the image of His image, and He Himself is the head of all creations, and of His body the Church. Therefore we are all members one of another, and the body of Christ, and the head cannot say to the feet, 'I have no need of you,' and if one member suffers, the whole body is moved and suffers with it."*

**St. Anthony the Great**

# Dialogue with an Athonite Elder on Fasting

Translated by John Sanidopoulos at the excellent [Mystagogy Blog](#)

"...don't forget that fasting is primarily to hunger for God!"

Bless Elder.

"The Lord bless you, my joy."

Are you on Mount Athos for many years?

"I've been here for sixty years, but what is sixty years to God; it is a breath.

Elder, I would like you to tell me a few things about fasting.

"In order to say something you must experience it, you must live it. Only one who was born near the sea or is a seaman can speak of the sea. But I will be obedient to your will and tell you what the Fathers said who were friends of fasting."

Elder, is fasting the aim?

"Fasting is not the aim, but the means towards it. See, it was your aim to come to Mount Athos, it was your destination. The boat which brought you was the means by which you arrived. Such is fasting; it is one of the means given to us by the love of God to crave for Him. God is our destination."

When did fasting appear?

"Fasting is commingled with humanity. In Paradise it was given to man by God, says Basil the Great."

But why did God give fasting? To reduce man?

"No, in order to free him! The Sacred Chrysostom writes that when God created man He took him and placed him in the hands of fasting, which is an affectionate mother and excellent teacher. He entrusted it for his salvation. Though fasting is a teacher, it does not limit but it cultivates man."

Is fasting necessary, Elder?

"Chrysostom will again reply to you: 'If fasting was necessary in Paradise, it is much more necessary outside of Paradise. If medicine was useful before an injury, it is much more useful after an injury.' Do you understand?"

What?

"Fasting was given in Paradise as a precaution to not fall. Since man fell it is given therapeutically."

Then what is the purpose of fasting?



"Fasting withers evil desires, says Saint Maximus the Confessor; and Saint Symeon the New Theologian says it softens our hearts. Through fasting every good work is accomplished and perfected, says Saint Gregory Palamas. For all these reasons Sacred Chrysostom confesses his love for fasting: 'I love fasting, because it is the mother of wisdom and the well of philosophical acts.'"

How should we fast?

"Fasting is a means and spiritual tool which is not limited to food, but the entire man must participate in it psychosomatically. Listen to what John Chrysostom says: 'Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of greed. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fish, but bite and devour our brothers?'"

How do we bite and devour our brothers?

"With slander and criticism, which proceed from the lack of love for our brother."

Thank you, Elder. You have benefited me much.

"May we thank God for enlightening our Saints."

Your prayers.

"Go in goodness, and may the Grace of God cover you, the Panagia protect you, and the Saints accompany you. And don't forget that fasting is primarily to hunger for God!"

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## Thoughts

✘ The holy Fathers in general consider blasphemous thoughts to be not our thoughts but provocations of the enemy and when we do not agree with them but grieve that they have penetrated our mind, then this is a sign that we are not guilty of them. One should not be disturbed that they come. When a person becomes disturbed, the enemy attacks him even more, but when he pays no attention, disregards them and does not consider them to be a sin, then the thoughts vanish.

St. Macarius of Optina

✘ Do not be bothered by blasphemous thoughts, but try to despise them. God will not call you to account for them - they are from the devil.

St. Anatoly of Optina

✘ Especially do not be disturbed by blasphemous thoughts which clearly come from the envy of the enemy. They occur in a person either because of proud self-opinion or the condemnation of others.

St. Ambrose of Optina

**"There is no cleanness in him who thinks evil," says St. Symeon the New Theologian; and he further adds, "How can there be a pure heart in him, who soils it with impure thoughts as a mirror is darkened by dust?"**

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## Reasons To Fast

God Himself established fasting. In the Old Testament, preparation for a special holy occasion included fasting and prayer. The New Testament often mentions fasting. Our Lord fasted Himself for 40 days before going out to preach. Fasting is clearly not optional inasmuch as Our Lord said, regarding fasting *When you fast* (Matt. 6:16), rather than *If you fast*. Our Lord, speaking of His disciples, said that after His departure, they would fast: *when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then they shall fast*.

Our Lord also said that we can overcome the devil only through prayer and fasting. When His disciples reported to Him that they had been unable to cast out a demon, Our Lord explained to them that *this kind* [the devil and his foul spirits] *goeth not out but by prayer and fasting*. If we are given but two weapons--prayer and fasting-- in our battle against the demonic powers, we should not cast one of these weapons aside and ignore it. What soldier who knows only two weapons work against a particular enemy would throw one away?

Apostolic writings also mention fasting. St. Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, speaking about marriage, counsels that husbands and wives not deny one another *except it be for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer, and come together again*. Clearly, fasting and praying together are a part of Christian marriage, according to the Apostle.

It is amazing to me, that most Protestants ignore fasting although it is documented in the Scriptures. So much for *sola scriptura*. They neglect fasting, no matter how many times the Scriptures mention it. The Church has established fasting periods that actually total up to about half of the year, averaging about 180 days, when you add them all together. Each of the seasons has its particular fasting period: the winter fast before Christmas; the spring fast of Great Lent; the summer Apostles fast; and the fall Dormition fast. Throughout the rest of the year, two more days a week--Wednesday and Friday--are assigned to fasting, with individual special fast days connected with feasts, as well, such as the Eve of Theophany, the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, and the Elevation of the Holy Cross.

Apart from being a spiritual discipline, fasting is also very healthy. Everyone should avoid meat and dairy products two days per week, in order to help keep animal fats and related cholesterol problems under control. Contemporary physicians are making no great discovery, of what the Church has known for thousands of years. The original commandment that God gave to our ancestors Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was a fasting commandment: *eat of the fruit of all the trees but this one*. If the fall of mankind and the loss of paradise were the result of breaking a fasting commandment, we should probably not ignore the fasts.

Father Alexander Lebedeff

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St. John Chrysostom writes, "If we adhere to the true dogmas and are not concerned about our behavior, we will not have any kind of benefit; and in the same way, if we concern ourselves about our behavior and neglect true dogmas, we will receive no benefit for our salvation. If we want to be delivered from Gehenna and to gain the Kingdom, we need to be adorned on both sides: correctness of dogmas and honorable living."

## **HIS EMINENCE METROPOLITAN ALEXIOS' MESSAGE ON THE SUNDAY OF THE HOLY CROSS**

"...Since the Holy Cross is also called the tree of life, and this tree has been planted in the center of Paradise, in the same way the Holy Fathers have planted the tree of the Cross in the center of the Great Lent so we can eat from it and live forever."

*Synaxarion of the Sunday of the Cross*

This Sunday we will be almost at the middle of Great Lent. As we look back on the preceding weeks, we may feel that we have not accomplished very much. There seems to be a voice that speaks negatively in our inner souls, the voice of the devil, or a spirit of pessimism, helplessness and despair.

In our society today, people often look for "the easy way out," and try to avoid any pain, problems or difficulties. However, Great Lent helps us to understand that life is often hard, and that it is our responsibility to struggle against the passions, using the tools that our Church provides: prayer, fasting, worship and almsgiving.

Today we venerate the Cross of Christ not only to remind ourselves of the coming of His Crucifixion and Resurrection, but to gather strength from it and to thank Him for what He did for us on the Cross. It is through the Holy and Life-giving Cross that we understand we are participants in a miracle of Divine Involvement and Love.

We are now halfway through our shared journey to Holy Pascha and Christ's Glorious Resurrection. On the Sunday of the Holy Cross, the lesson that our Church is teaching us is that we are going to have to take up our *own* crosses. What does this mean – to take up *our* cross? It means that we must deny ourselves. We must struggle to resist evil and temptation, overcoming the obstacles and not give up. Because the end of our journey is life and light and joy!

On this Sunday, as we lift high the Most-Holy and Life-Giving Cross, let us therefore celebrate and rejoice: "Come, all faithful, let us venerate the holy Resurrection of Christ. For behold, through the Cross joy has come to all the world. Blessing the Lord always, let us praise His Resurrection. For enduring the Cross for us, He destroyed death by death."

My beloved, I encourage you to pray for each other, as indeed I pray for you. May Great Lent spiritually uplift and strengthen us, so that we may truly be partakers in His Passion, Crucifixion, and glorious Resurrection!

I remain, with paternal blessings and with much love in our Lord,

+Metropolitan Alexios  
Metropolitan of Atlanta