

## Archpastoral Letter for the Great Fast 2015

Dearly Beloved Members of our Diocesan Family:

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

“The springtime of the Fast has dawned, the flower of repentance has begun to open ...”

As we begin Great Lent, we should do so in anticipation of the spiritual blessings that we will receive through our deeper commitment to God during this holy season. Through our repentance and humility we should live each day, focusing our hearts and minds on His presence. Through our prayer and fasting and almsgiving, and by His grace, our spiritual lives can be transformed by Him and our souls drawn closer to Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is, of course, the primary goal of the Lenten season – and of every aspect of our Orthodox Faith – to bring us closer to God, to help us become more like Christ, and eventually to take our rightful place as heirs of the heavenly kingdom. In the Scripture we read that prayer, fasting and service to people were the hallmarks of Christ’s ministry. Through His example, we are shown a manner of living that focuses on the Gospel message of communion with God. This, then, is our focus for the Great Fast.

All too often, I fear, we approach Lent too casually, not seriously enough, almost taking it for granted. Rather than being an opportunity for us to come closer to our Savior and become more like Him, the Fast is seen as an encumbrance on our schedules, our social life and personal demands. It is as if we see Lent as a burden ... a burden that at times we choose to lighten. And my greatest fear is that this happens in the arena of the Mystery of Forgiveness.

If our Orthodox Christianity is anything, it is a faith of forgiveness. To the paralytic, Jesus said: “Thy sins are forgiven thee.” To the adulteress, He said: “Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more.” And from the cross He prayed, “Father, forgive them ...” Forgiveness fills the Gospel: the father welcoming home the prodigal son; the Good Shepherd carrying the lost sheep; the tender look at Peter, across the courtyard, after he had denied Christ three times; and the promise spoken to the dying thief: “This day you will be with me in paradise.” Indeed, our faith is about forgiveness.

But do we take this too lightly, too routinely? The Lenten Season properly begins with Forgiveness Vespers, which culminates in the Ceremony of Mutual Forgiveness. Here, all who are present bow down before one another and ask for forgiveness. In this way, we begin the Fast with a clean conscience, with forgiveness, and with renewed Christian love. How many of us participate in this rite wholeheartedly? How many avoid coming to exchange mutual forgiveness, or do not attend Forgiveness Vespers, or skip that Sunday altogether?

The Scripture is very clear. There is one pre-condition for our being forgiven by the Lord: that we forgive others. “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” (Matthew 6:14-15). This echoes the words of the Lord’s Prayer: “... and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

There is a beautiful story from the life of the saintly Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of England, who confessed as a young man that he could not forgive someone for what he had done against him. After numerous attempts at reasoning with Anthony, his spiritual father told him, "Then when you pray the Lord's Prayer, you must say, 'Do not forgive me my trespasses as I do not forgive so-and-so his trespasses.'" Quickly, young Anthony realized the need to forgive his brother.

One might make the excuse, "I don't know some of these people in church; for what should I ask forgiveness?" – The answer is simple: ask for forgiveness for not knowing them better. Let us take this first step in the Mystery of Forgiveness and live it out in the spirit in which it is given to us; that is, in the love of our forgiving God: "God forgives, and I forgive ... may He forgive us both."

The second and central aspect of Lent as the season of forgiveness is the Sacrament of Confession. There is a tradition that during the first week of the Fast, "Clean Week," one goes to confession to clean his house thoroughly. The reading from Isaiah on the first day of Lent sets that tone: "Wash yourselves and ye shall be clean; put away the wicked ways from your souls before Mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well. Seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, consider the fatherless, and plead for the widow. Come then, and let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow; though they be red like crimson, I will make them white as wool" (Isaiah 1:16-18).

Whether we go to confession during the first week of Lent or sometime later in the Fast, the timing is not the issue. It is the attitude with which we approach the Sacrament. There are those who look at Confession as an obligation to be met, so that one can be "a member in good standing" in the parish, run for parish council, or maintain burial privileges. This totally misses the mark. In the Mystery of Confession, we receive forgiveness and absolution from the Lord in exchange for our sorrow. What we are blessed with is the same forgiveness that Peter who denied Christ three times received; the same forgiveness that the adulteress received; and the same forgiveness that the thief on the cross received.

Do we receive this forgiveness anywhere else in the world? Can a student taking an exam tell his teacher he is sorry he missed question 7; can he do it over again? Can a basketball player who misses a foul shot, say he is sorry and try again? Can a car salesman who needs so many sales to get his bonus, say he is sorry he failed to seal the deal and make his quota, but still get the bonus? Forgiveness comes not from the world, but from our Savior.

Saint John the Evangelist warns us: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:8-9). St. Paul cautions us against coming to Communion with unconfessed sins: "Let a man examine himself, and then let him eat of the Bread and drink of the Cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's Body" (I Cor. 11:28-29). Let us approach the Sacrament of Confession in the spirit in which It is given.

And what spirit is that? Forgiveness is a gift, God's gift to the penitent. It is an expensive gift, and if we take it, it should mean we belong to the Giver. He has purchased all of us; he should have our total love. It is a gift that should bind our forgiven soul in endless love and gratitude to the Forgive. They love most, Christ says, who have been forgiven most. The story of the giving of this gift is told to us through the divine services all through Great Lent, but most especially during Great and Holy Week – through the detailed accounts of the Holy Scripture, and in the beautiful hymns of our Holy Church. How many of us attend every service? How many of us pick and choose, considering the length and ignoring the content? Christ did not pick and choose; He loves us all, and He died for us all.

In the book *Jesus: A Dialogue with the Saviour*, written by a monk of the Eastern Church, we read the cost of the gift of our forgiveness and the spirit in which it was given: "Blood flows from Your forehead, from Your hands, and from Your scourged body, O Lord. It flows in long streams. It is going to flow from Your open side as though Your heart were bursting under the pressure of Your suffering love. The cup is poured out in libation.

"The crown of thorns bruised Your head. Woven in the form of a circle, these thorns are like the sins of men, gathered together and heaped upon you. Your feet, O Lord, are nailed to the wood. Your Cross is the winepress where the true vine is pressed. You have no possibility of escape. You are waiting for me ... Fastened to Your Cross, You compel Yourself to this waiting. It is possible for me not to come, but You are there and You remain where You have allowed Yourself to be placed.

"Your arms are stretched out. They are open as an appeal to all men. They cannot be closed again. The nails keep them there in this gesture which is at one and the same time an invitation and an embrace. In silence they beckon to me: 'Come.'"

My beloved, God does not force anyone to come to Him. We are not dragged into His kingdom by the hairs of our head. He loves us into it, and because He loves us into it, it means the Cross, the crown of thorns, the nails, the spear – the forgiveness that cost our Savior His life. Let us not take this Lenten Season and the gift of forgiveness it offers for granted. Let us not take lightly the Rite of Mutual Forgiveness, the Mystery of Confession, and the divine services, especially Holy Week. When we look at the Cross, we know that Our Lord has gone as far as He can go for us. Only one question remains for each of us to answer this Lent: How far will we go to meet the One Who loves us more than we love ourselves?

Asking your forgiveness for the times I have failed you, I remain with sincere love and humble prayers,

*+ Michael*

**+ MICHAEL**

Bishop of New York and the  
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