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The following is the archpastoral message from His Grace, Bishop +Michael, on the occasion of the beginning of Great Lent 2011.

### Archpastoral Letter for Great Lent 2011

Beloved Clergy and Faithful of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey:

*Christ is in our midst!*

In the very first sermon Our Lord ever preached and so many other times that He spoke, the theme was the same: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Our Church recalls that message throughout the year, but most especially during the season of the Great Fast, when she calls her spiritual children to repentance.

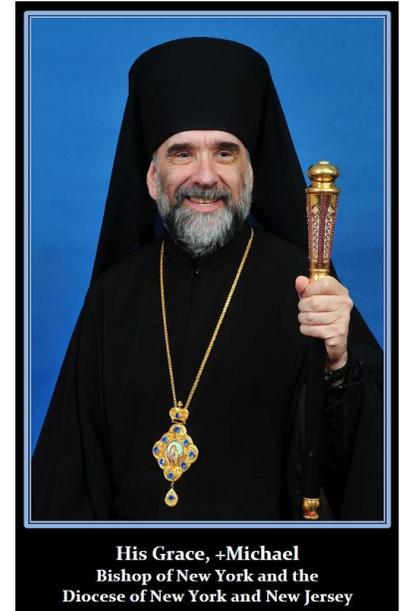
So often we think of repentance in negative terms: the added burdens of more services and longer prayers; the “giving up” of meat and dairy products and the desserts we love; and a call to come to confession, viewed by many as the most difficult of sacraments.

But there is another way, a positive manner, of viewing repentance. The word “repentance” – in Greek, “*metanoia*” – literally means “turning around” our “*nous*” – which the holy fathers interpret as our “heart.” It is turning our hearts back to God, after immersing ourselves in the things of the world; it is coming home to the Father, like the prodigal son did, after squandering our time and talents; it is opening up our heart and once again enthroning God there, where our passions have been ruling. Rather than looking at Lent as a time of dreaded demands, let us look at it as the saints of our Church have viewed it: a time of renewal, an opportunity for regeneration, another chance for us to regain our inheritance as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

During the next several weeks, the Church will provide us with several avenues of coming closer to Christ our Savior, opening ourselves to Him, and enthroning Him in our hearts as “Lord and Master of my life.” I urge you to take them seriously, create a personal discipline that includes as much of these as possible, and thus re-establish as close a relationship as you can with “the author of our salvation.”

#### Prayer

A child will ask, “*Why do we pray?*” We pray because we seek communion with God, and we pray because the Lord Himself gave us that example – before every event in His life recorded in the Gospel of Luke, He is found to be at prayer, privately on a mountain or in a garden, away from everyone, alone in communion with the Father. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Christ instructs us, “When you



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pray (not if, but when), go into your room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matt. 6:6) ... and then after telling us not to pray like the heathen with vain repetitions, He gives us the model for praying, the Lord's Prayer, for calling upon God and saying: “Our Father who art in heaven ...” I encourage all of you to increase your prayer life this Lenten Season, drawing closer to God through a more faithful daily conversation with Him from the depth of your soul. Whether you add an extra prayer, an extra repetition of the Jesus Prayer, or an extra canon of repentance, set a rule for yourself that you will follow faithfully every day. If you need guidance, ask your spiritual father. But turn aside from all the excuses of the hustle and bustle of daily pressures, and open your heart through sincere prayer to the Lord who loves us more than we love ourselves.

### **Divine Services**

That same young person may ask, “*Why do we need to go to Church?*” We go in order to further our relationship with the Lord – through corporate, liturgical prayer – and because Jesus Himself gave us that example by attending services in the synagogue every Sabbath and in the temple every feast day. Our Church offers us several services to participate in throughout the Great Fast, in addition to Saturday evening Vespers and the Sunday Liturgy: Forgiveness Vespers to open this sacred season, the Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete to introduce the theme of repentance during the first week, Memorial Saturdays when we remember our loved ones who have gone to eternal rest, the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy which offers us additional opportunities to receive the precious Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Bridegroom Matins and the full complement of Holy Week services that make present to us the events of the last week of the life of the Suffering Servant who “was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities ... and by whose stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

I urge all of our dedicated clergy to offer as many of the prescribed liturgical services as possible, in order to give your parishioners every opportunity to grow closer to the Lord in this sacred season. And I urge all of our diocesan faithful to seriously strive to attend as many divine services during Lent as they possibly can. Our liturgical worship is patterned after the heavenly worship John the Theologian was privileged to see in the vision of Revelation 4-5. We must truly love these divine services, because they are a taste of the heavenly worship we hope to share in for all eternity.

### **Fasting**

“*Why do we fast?*” The obvious answer is that Our Lord Himself fasted forty days and forty nights, eating nothing, after which, the Gospel tells us, He was hungry. Fasting is an ascetical exercise that shows that we have control over our bodies, over food, over drink. Our fasting reverses the failure of Adam and Eve who did not fast from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Jesus tells us, “When you fast (not if, but when), do not be like the hypocrites ...” (Matthew 6:16). The centuries-old calendar of our Church eases us into the prescribed fasting guidelines: on Meat-fare Sunday, we give up meat and meat products, and abstain from them until Pascha; on Cheese-fare Sunday, we give up cheese and other milk products, and abstain from them until the Feast of the Resurrection. This is a small sacrifice when we consider that Our Lord gave up His life on the Cross for us and for our salvation. I urge all our diocesan clergy and laypeople to follow this time-honored tradition of our faith and embrace the guidelines of fasting this Lenten season as faithfully as we are able.

But fasting is more than abstaining from food. It is also, and more importantly, abstaining from sin. Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk instructs us in this area of our spiritual life with these words: “An excellent

faster is one who restrains himself from every impurity, who imposes abstinence on his tongue and restrains it from idle talk, foul language, slander, condemnation, flattery, and all manner of evil speaking, who abstains from anger, rage, malice and vengeance, and withdraws from every evil." I pray that we will all be able to live this Great Fast in the spirit of the wisdom of this great saint of our Church.

### **Almsgiving**

*"Why should we do acts of charity?"* Again, because the Lord Himself did works that revealed love. He gave of Himself to make the blind see, the deaf hear, the crippled walk, and the dead rise. He calls upon us to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, shelter to the stranger, clothing to the naked, visitation to the sick and imprisoned. And when you have done this, in the Parable of the Last Judgment, He tells us, "you did it to Me." He wants us not to do charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. "When (not if, but when) you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet ... do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:1,6).

In this Lenten Season, the saints of our Church encourage us to do even more works of charity than we do usually. The holy fathers direct us to use the money we have not spent on the rich foods – from which we are abstaining – to help feed the poor and hungry. Saint Basil guides us to consider that the clothes or shoes in our closets we are not using really belong to those who have none. Saint John Chrysostom says so beautifully in one of his famous sermons: "Almsgiving is giving to Christ Himself, at an altar more holy than that in the sanctuary" (Homily 20 on 2 Corinthians). In this spirit, I urge that all of us seek to do works of almsgiving, from the funds we save by fasting, that will be of assistance to the "least of the brethren" – in the name of the Lord Himself.

### **The Mysteries**

*"Why Confession? Why Communion?"* The most intimate expressions of our relationship with Our Lord are the Holy Mysteries. The Lenten Season is the perfect time to "spring clean" our souls of all that has accumulated over the past months – to say with the prodigal son, having distanced ourselves from our real home and having squandered our spiritual inheritance, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee." The Scripture instructs us, "Confess your sins ..." (James 5:16). If we do confess them, Saint John tells us, "He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). If we do not give them up in confession, they remain ours, they remain within us, polluting and destroying our souls. And "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Thus, Saint Paul warns us: "So 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" (1 Corinthians 11:29).

To partake of the precious Body and Blood of our Lord God and Savior is the summit of the sacramental life. To commune in the Eucharist with the Son of God is to become one with Him: "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in Him ... whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:54,56). What greater way is there to celebrate the great events of Holy Week and Pascha than to join with the apostles and all the saints and all the members of the Orthodox Church throughout the world and throughout all of time in eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Savior in Holy Communion. This is what He asked be done on the night before His saving Passion: "Take eat ... drink of it all of you ... Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19). To fail to do this means spiritual death: "Unless you eat the flesh

