Archpastoral Letter for Great Lent 2024

"Let us set out with joy upon the season of Lent and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us purify our soul and cleanse our flesh; as we fast from food, let us abstain from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit, may we persevere with love; and so be counted worthy to see the solemn Passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness to behold His holy Resurrection."

With the celebration of Forgiveness Vespers, we begin the forty days of Great Lent, start our journey towards Pascha, and the commemoration of our Lord's Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Great Lent is a sacred time of renewal and fresh beginnings for those baptized in Christ.

The prostrations we make before one another at the Rite of Forgiveness during Forgiveness Vespers symbolize our humble desire to begin the holy season of Great Lent in a spirit of true repentance and contrition, to walk faithfully in the way of the Lord, and to reach out in charity to others, in particular to our needy brothers and sisters.

I have said that Great Lent is a sacred time, which implies that the forty days of Great Lent are a gift to us from Almighty God, made holy by Christ's period of fasting and prayer in the desert. Those who genuinely want to enter into the spirit of Great Lent and the Great Fast must be properly disposed to do so, and this requires firm resolve, commitment, and hard work. We must fight against and refuse to act on the temptations the world places before us to seek its comforts and pleasures, comforts and pleasures that move us away from God and put our souls in great jeopardy.

During Great Lent, we must remain sober and vigilant. During these most solemn days of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, we keep careful guard over ourselves. We must not only watch what we put into our stomachs but also what we see, say, and do. We must abstain from calumny, deceit, lying, gossip, idle talk, arrogance, anger, and every other vice that separates us from God and from entering fully into the life-changing and life-giving events of Holy Week and Pascha.

Before beginning His public ministry, Christ saw the need to withdraw and discern the Father's will in this regard ever more fully. He accomplished this through self-discipline and resistance to the Devil's temptations. He has set us an example that we should follow the same path. The penitential yet grace-filled season of Great Lent offers us the God-given opportunity to do this.

The Lord Jesus set out on His Lenten journey after John had baptized Him. Great Lent may be described as the rediscovery of our baptism when we once mysteriously died in the waters of the font and rose with Christ to begin a new way of life.

In the Italo-Greek tradition, the Church calls us to renew our baptismal promises on Holy Saturday, but our vocation is to live out those promises every day of our lives.

The time has come, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel. Look to Christ and hear the voice of God calling you out of the darkness of sin and into the glorious light of eternal life.

What God offers us in Great Lent we cannot find anywhere else. The world tempts us with promises of happiness but never delivers on them, for those promises are without substance; they are empty and soul-destroying. They deceive us into believing that the world can give us our heart's desire when God is what our hearts seek and desire.

As we look around us, we know that nature is slowly reawakening to life, and the days are getting brighter and longer. God in Christ intends this spiritually to take place in our hearts and souls, to realize that we are indeed sons and daughters of a gracious Father, who in love has given us His Son to be our Way, our Truth, and our Life.

Let us take the opportunity of Great Lent to maintain through prayer a renewed and authentic relationship with Christ. It is our great good fortune that God reconciles us to Himself through the Holy Mystery of Confession. We are equally fortunate to be able to meet Him in the Eucharist, to permit Him to renew our lives and convert us. Through regular reading of the Bible, we can prepare for Holy Week and Pascha, when we celebrate what lies at the heart of our Orthodox Catholic Faith: the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This, the foundation of our hope, is central to every Eucharistic celebration.

If we live our Faith, we can turn to the future, where Christ awaits us. Self-denial, intense prayer, almsgiving, and fasting can help us along this path. These actions are not expressions of mournfulness but rather liberate us from the superfluous. "When you fast, do not look gloomy!" the Gospel tells us. Doing without enables us to discern more clearly what matters in our lives, opens us up to God, and helps us live more consciously in harmony with creation.

I encourage all to enter fully into the spirit of Great Lent, letting this holy season purify and reignite our dry and barren hearts with the fire of love for God in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

During the forty days of Great Lent, Let us cry every day and every hour to Him, the Just Judge, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" and beseech Him

that He not cast us away from before His face but instead show us His measureless great mercy. Let our pleas for forgiveness rise before Him like fragrant incense. May they be acceptable in His sight and in His graciousness; may He show us His favor by showering us with His mercy and forgiveness.

I wish you all a blessed and spiritually fruitful Lenten journey, and in all the ways I have offended or let you down, I prostrate myself at your feet and ask your forgiveness of my sins and transgressions.

Your unworthy father in Christ,

+Archbishop Stephen