Archpastoral Letter for the Beginning of Great Lent
of
His Eminence, Archbishop Stephen

March 3, 2025

Beloved in Christ,

As the solemn and sacred season of Great Lent begins, I write to you with a heart full of love, encouragement, and reverence for the holy journey we are about to embark upon together. Great Lent is not merely a time of external discipline, but a profound invitation to a deeper communion with our Creator. It is a time of reflection, repentance, renewal, and the hope of transformation. The Church calls us to an inward and outward renewal through prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and, most importantly, through the grace-filled beauty of our Orthodox worship services.

In the Lenten Triodion, we are continually reminded that the season of Great Lent is not only a time of self-discipline, but also a time of profound joy and expectation. The hymnology of this season expresses both the sobriety of repentance and the joyful anticipation of Christ's glorious Resurrection. Great Lent is not a time of sorrow for sorrow's sake, but a time of preparing ourselves, in humility and sincerity, for the joy of Pascha.

Let us not forget, dear brothers and sisters, that Great Lent is a time for new beginnings. Just as the fig tree in the parable bears fruit only after the gardener's care and patience, so too are we called to cultivate the spiritual fruits of repentance. St. John Chrysostom reminds us that the purpose of fasting is not merely to abstain from food, but to "strip ourselves of all that is unworthy of the image of God" (Homily on Repentance). The Lenten fast provides us with an opportunity to purify our bodies and minds, so that we might better receive the grace of God. By doing so, we open ourselves to a transformation of heart and mind, and we experience a renewal of the divine image within us.

Great Lent is a call to conversion, to a change of heart. This is why our Lenten journey begins with the powerful and convicting words of the Publican's prayer: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). This simple yet profound prayer, which echoes through the days of Great Lent, reminds us that true repentance is not about outward appearances or self-righteousness, but about a humble acknowledgment of our need for God's mercy. As St. Ephrem the Syrian writes, "Let us make the days of Lent a ladder by which we ascend to the kingdom of heaven, and let us enter the struggle with faith, joy, and love for the Lord."

But Great Lent is not only a time of personal renewal; it is also a time of communal healing. The services of Great Lent, especially those of the Great Penitential Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, the Presanctified Liturgy, and the Lenten Hours, are a deep well of spiritual nourishment. These divine services, rich in hymns and prayers, are designed to draw us closer to the heart of the Church and the very presence of God. The Presanctified Liturgy, for example, invites us to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, not only as an act of remembrance, but as an encounter with the living Lord, strengthening us for the spiritual struggle of the Fast.

The hymns of the Church, as set forth in the Triodion, are filled with deep reflections on the theme of repentance and divine mercy. "The beautiful Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian, which we say several times a day during Great Lent, and that of the Jesus Prayer pierce our souls with longing for communion with the Lord. These prayers form our hearts and minds, and they carry us through the days of fasting, reminding us that we are not alone on this journey. The Church, through her sacred worship, accompanies us every step of the way, guiding us toward spiritual renewal.

The beauty of our Lenten services also lies in their ability to deepen our sense of the presence of God. The evening hymns that call us to repentance, the solemn tones of the services, and the visual beauty of the icons and the church's atmosphere, all invite us into an intimate communion with the Lord. As St. Symeon the New Theologian writes, "The aim of the Christian life is to experience God's presence—this is the goal of all our prayers and ascetic struggles." The liturgical services of Great Lent are not mere formalities, but means by which we draw closer to God, experiencing His mercy and love, and preparing ourselves to celebrate His Resurrection with renewed joy.

Therefore, as we begin this holy season of Great Lent, let us approach it not merely as a time for fasting, but as a time of hopeful anticipation. It is a time to repent, to change, and to prepare ourselves for the great feast of Pascha, the victory of life over death. Let us not be burdened by the weight of our sins, but rather let us lay them at the feet of the One who calls us to repentance with love and mercy. As we offer our prayers, fast from food and distractions, and give alms to the needy, let us remember that the ultimate goal of this season is to open our hearts to the grace of God, that we might be renewed and transformed.

May this Great Lent be a time of spiritual awakening, a time of new beginnings for all of us. May we be drawn into the deep beauty of the Church's worship, finding strength in the prayers and hymns that shape our souls. And may we emerge from this season, renewed in faith and love, ready to greet the risen Christ with joy in our hearts and peace in our souls.

With love in Christ,

+Archbishop Stephen