Homily for Forgiveness Sunday Vespers

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

Tonight, as we celebrate Vespers of Forgiveness Sunday, we enter into the holy season of Great Lent, a time of profound spiritual renewal, repentance, and purification. Before we embark on this sacred journey toward Pascha, the Church calls us to a most essential act—an act of forgiveness. Through the Rite of Mutual Forgiveness, we cleanse our hearts, we make peace with one another, and we lay a firm foundation for the forty days of spiritual, ascetical, and physical works that lie ahead.

Forgiveness, dear ones, is not a mere act of kindness or an optional practice. It is necessary for the purification of our souls. Without forgiveness, our hearts remain weighed down by the burdens of anger, resentment, and division. These are like shackles that prevent us from moving forward on the path of holiness. But when we forgive one another, we release ourselves from these chains and open the door to God's healing grace.

The Fathers of the Church are unanimous in teaching that forgiveness is indispensable to our spiritual life. St. John Chrysostom, the Golden-Mouthed, writes: “Forgive your neighbor, so that you may be forgiven. He who does not forgive does not know how to pray." These words are a sobering reminder to us. If we do not forgive, we cannot truly approach God in prayer, for our hearts are clouded by bitterness. To approach the throne of grace with an unforgiving heart is to offer prayers that are unclean and meaningless.

St. Maximus the Confessor, another luminary of Orthodox spirituality, tells us that forgiveness is the key to inner peace and spiritual ascent. He writes, “He who does not forgive is like one who, though sick, refuses to take the medicine.” Our souls, beloved, are sick with sin, and the medicine of forgiveness is the first step toward healing. Without this act of mercy, we remain trapped in our woundedness, unable to be made whole.

And so, on this night, the Church, in her great wisdom, offers us the Rite of Mutual Forgiveness. This Rite is not simply a symbolic gesture; it is a deep, transformative act that requires sincerity, humility, and courage. It is beautiful because, in it, we see the very essence of Christian love—the love that is freely given, the love that forgets offenses, and the love that seeks reconciliation. In forgiving one another, we imitate Christ, who forgave those who crucified Him, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The depth of this Rite is revealed in the mutual exchange of forgiveness. We stand before each other, acknowledging our offenses, however small or great, and we offer the gift of forgiveness. We ask for forgiveness, not as a mere formality, but as a sincere plea for the healing of our broken relationships. This act of mutual forgiveness creates a bond of unity in Christ, for it is only through reconciliation with one another that we can approach the altar of God with purity of heart. Pope St. Leo the Great, in his sermons on forgiveness, reminds us that when we forgive,

we "share in the grace of the Redeemer" and become co-workers in the restoration of God's image within us.

Let us not think of forgiveness as merely a preparation for Great Lent, but as an essential part of our Christian life. It is the very soil in which the seeds of repentance can take root. Without forgiveness, repentance is hollow; but with it, repentance becomes a living, transforming force in our lives. The slate is wiped clean, and we are freed to walk in the light of Christ.

As we enter the holy season of Great Lent, let us look deeply into our hearts and ask ourselves: Are we holding onto grudges, resentment, or anger? Are there relationships in our lives that need mending? We must be honest with ourselves, and if there is any unforgiveness in our hearts, we must let it go, for this is the first step in the purification of our souls.

Brothers and sisters, the journey ahead is long and demanding, but it is also full of grace, hope, and promise. As we fast, pray, and repent, let us not forget the power of forgiveness to renew us. Let us remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us that the measure with which we forgive is the measure with which we will be forgiven. Let us offer our forgiveness to others, as we desire the forgiveness of God.

Tonight, let us forgive one another with all our hearts, wiping the slate clean, and beginning anew our journey to the Cross and the empty Tomb. May this act of mutual forgiveness purify our souls and prepare us to enter into the joy of Pascha, where we will experience the fullness of God's mercy and love.

In closing, let us hear the words of St. Isaac the Syrian, who says, “Forgive all offenses, for in forgiving, you receive the peace of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

May the peace of Christ be with you all.

Amen.