Homily for the Beginning of the Lenten Triodion

February 9, 2025

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

With vespers of this evening, we begin the Lenten Triodion, a sacred sequence of services and readings that prepares us for Great Lent.

In the Catholic Orthodox Church, the preparatory weeks leading up to Great Lent are important times of spiritual preparation. They serve to help the faithful ready themselves for the penitential season, both physically and spiritually. These weeks, often called the "Pre-Lenten" period, are designed to encourage reflection, repentance, and a renewed commitment to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

There are four main weeks of preparation:

Publican and Pharisee (First Pre-Lenten Sunday): This Sunday introduces the period of preparation for Great Lent. It focuses on humility and repentance, based on the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14). The contrast between the proud Pharisee and the humble Publican teaches that God hears the prayers of the humble and repentant, regardless of social status.

Prodigal Son (Second Pre-Lenten Sunday): This Sunday, based on the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), emphasizes God's boundless mercy and forgiveness. The parable highlights the importance of repentance and returning to God after straying. The message is one of hope, as it shows that no matter how far one has fallen, God is always ready to forgive.

Meatfare Sunday (Third Pre-Lenten Sunday): Also called the Sunday of the Last Judgment, this Sunday is a reminder of the final judgment, where Christ will separate the righteous from the unrighteous. It is a day for reflecting on the eternal consequences of our actions, and the faithful are encouraged to begin fasting in preparation for Lent. Meatfare Sunday also marks the last day meat can be eaten before the start of the Lenten fast.

Cheesefare Sunday (Fourth Pre-Lenten Sunday): The final Sunday before the beginning of Great Lent, Cheesefare Sunday, marks the end of dairy consumption in preparation for the upcoming fast. It is often a day of forgiveness, where Orthodox Christians seek reconciliation with one another, following the example of Christ's call to forgive one

another as He has forgiven us. This day serves as a final opportunity to make peace before entering the more intense period of fasting and prayer in Lent.

During these transformative weeks, we are called to cultivate a spirit of repentance, which involves not only recognizing our shortcomings but also seeking forgiveness and committing to change. Prayer becomes an essential practice, allowing us to connect with God, seek His guidance, and strengthen our relationship with Him. Fasting is also an integral part of this season, serving as a spiritual discipline that teaches restraint and helps us develop a deeper appreciation for God's blessings.

Almsgiving, or charitable giving, is another vital component of Lent. It encourages us to act selflessly, share our resources with those in need, and foster a spirit of community and compassion.

As we embark on this spiritual journey together, let us rely on the grace of God and the wisdom of the Holy Fathers to guide us. Let us reflect on the profound significance of this sacred time, the lessons it holds for our lives, and the transformative path it sets before us. May this Lent be a time of growth, enlightenment, and renewal for all of us.

The Church, in her great wisdom, opens the Triodion with the solemn and yet hopeful invitation to "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). This call is not merely for the renewal of our bodies but for the transformation of our hearts. As St. John Chrysostom so beautifully teaches, "The body is the temple of the soul, and the soul is the temple of the Holy Spirit." Thus, our Lenten effort is to cleanse both body and soul, preparing them to receive the glorious Pascha of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, through His Resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death.

In this blessed time of fasting, we are reminded by the Holy Fathers that it is not simply the abstention from food that constitutes true fasting, but the cleansing of the heart from sin. St. Isaac the Syrian says, "Fasting is the mother of prayer and the guide to true humility." When we fast, we deny ourselves of earthly comforts to make space for the spiritual nourishment that comes through prayer, repentance, and the study of the holy Scriptures. Yet, we must remember, as St. Clement of Alexandria warns, that fasting must never be an end in itself, but a means to draw nearer to God, to purify our hearts, and to return to Him with a contrite and humble spirit.

The Apostle Paul calls us to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12), and the Church, in her wisdom, places before us the threefold path of repentance: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Each of these is interwoven in the life of the Christian, for as St. Basil the Great teaches, "The person who fasts without prayer is like a soldier who fights without armor." Prayer strengthens our souls, fasting disciplines our bodies, and almsgiving helps us to open our hearts to those in need. Through these acts of love, we

unite ourselves with the suffering Christ, Who, in His boundless mercy, gave Himself for our salvation.

Let us also reflect on the powerful example of the Prodigal Son, whose return to his father's house is the very image of our own journey of repentance. St. Ambrose of Milan explains that "the Prodigal Son is the emblem of the entire human race, wandering in sin, but called back to the Father's embrace through repentance." The parable reminds us that no matter how far we have strayed, the Lord is always ready to embrace us, to forgive us, and to restore us to the joy of His presence. It is precisely in repentance that we discover the true meaning of freedom—freedom from the chains of sin, freedom to live in the light of God's love.

But repentance, dear ones, is not a solitary act; it is a communal one. In the words of St. Seraphim of Sarov, "Acquire the Spirit of Peace, and thousands around you will be saved." We are all called, not only to fast and pray for our own salvation, but also to bear one another's burdens in love. In this season of Lent, let us be mindful of our neighbors—especially the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed. As St. John Chrysostom reminds us, "The fast is not for the sake of our own personal asceticism alone, but for the sake of the whole world." Let us offer our alms generously, for in doing so, we not only alleviate the suffering of others, but we also partake in the mercy and compassion of Christ Himself.
Finally, let us not forget that the purpose of our Lenten journey is not solely a struggle against sin, but a joyful anticipation of the Paschal feast. As St. Athanasius of Alexandria teaches, "Lent is not a time of despair but of hope, for it leads us to the glorious Resurrection of our Lord."

In our fasting, we look forward to the feast of Pascha, where we will celebrate the victory of Christ over sin and death, and the new life He offers to all who repent and believe in Him. Our Lenten efforts, then, are not an end in themselves, but a means to experience more fully the joy of the Resurrection, which is the ultimate goal of our Christian lives.
Let us, then, approach the Lenten season with repentance and humility, seeking the mercy of our Lord, Who is ever ready to forgive and to embrace us. Let us commit ourselves to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, so that through these means, we may be purified and renewed in the image of God, and prepared to celebrate with joy the Resurrection of our Savior.

May God grant us the strength and grace to walk this holy path, to struggle in love and humility, and to be filled with the peace of Christ as we journey towards the great and holy feast of Pascha.

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