

The Lenten spring
has come!
The light of repentance!
O brothers, let cleanse
ourselves from all evil!
Crying out
to the Giver of Light:
Glory to Thee,
O Lover of man!



Fire & Light

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February 26, 2017

Forgiveness Sunday

Sunday of Cheesefare

St. Porphyrios of Gaza (420)

St. Sebastian of Poshekhonye (1542)

First Week of Great Lent

Abba Moses of Egypt was asked: "What is the good of the fasts and watchings which one imposes upon oneself?" And he replied, "They make the soul humble. For it is written: *'Behold my lowliness and my toil, and forgive all my sins'* (Ps. 24:18). So if the soul gives itself all this hardship, God will have mercy upon it. "



- ✘ Mon-Thurs: 6:30pm ~ The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete
- ✘ Friday, Mar. 3 ~ 6:30pm ~ First Presanctified Liturgy (*Potluck Lenten Supper*)
- Next Sunday is Sunday of Orthodoxy – bring your Icons from home for the Procession!



Lent: The Journey to Pascha from Great Lent by Alexander Schmemmann



When a man leaves on a journey, he must know where he is going. Thus with Lent. Above all, Lent is a spiritual journey and its destination is Easter, "the Feast of Feasts." It is the preparation for the "fulfillment of Pascha, the true Revelation." We must begin, therefore, by trying to understand this connection between Lent and Easter, for it reveals something very essential, very crucial about our Christian faith and life.

Is it necessary to explain that Easter is much more than one of the feasts, more than a yearly commemoration of a past event? Anyone who has, be it only once, taken part in that night which is "brighter than the day," who has tasted of that unique joy, knows it. But what is that joy about? Why can we sing, as we do during the Paschal liturgy: "today are all things filled with light, heaven and earth and places under the

earth"? In what sense do we celebrate, as we claim we do, "the death of Death, the annihilation of Hell, the beginning of a new and everlasting life..."? To all these questions, the answer is: the *new life* which almost two thousand years ago shone forth from the grave, has been given to us, to all those who believe in Christ. And it was given to us on the day of our Baptism, in which, as St. Paul says, we "were buried with Christ...unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead we also may walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Thus on Easter we celebrate Christ's Resurrection as something that happened and still happens *to us*. For each one of us received the gift of that new life and the power to accept it and to live by it. It is a gift which radically alters our attitude toward everything in this world, including death. It makes it possible for us joyfully to affirm: "Death is no more!" Oh, death is still there, to

(OVER)

be sure, and we still face it and someday it will come and take us. But it is our whole faith that by His own death Christ changed the very nature of death, made it a *passage* — a "passover," a "Pascha" — into the Kingdom of God, transforming the tragedy of tragedies into the ultimate victory. "Trampling down death by death," He made us partakers of His Resurrection. This is why at the end of the Paschal Matins we say: "Christ is risen and life reigneth! Christ is risen and not one dead remains in the grave!"

Such is the faith of the Church, affirmed and made evident by her countless Saints. Is it not our daily experience, however, that this faith is very seldom ours, that all the time we lose and betray the "new life" which we received as a gift, and that in fact we live as if Christ did not rise from the dead, as if that unique event had no meaning whatsoever for us? All this because of our weakness, because of the impossibility for us to live constantly by "faith, hope, and love" on that level to which Christ raised us when he said: "Seek ye, first of all, the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." We simply forget all this — so busy are we, so immersed in our daily preoccupations — an because we forget, we fail. And through this forgetfulness, failure, and sin, our life becomes "old" again — petty, dark and ultimately meaningless — a meaningless journey toward a meaningless end. We manage to forget even death and then, all of a sudden, in the midst of our "enjoying life" it comes to us: horrible, inescapable, senseless. We may from time to time acknowledge and confess our various "sins," yet we cease to refer our life to that new life which Christ revealed and gave to us. Indeed, we live as if He never came. This is the only real sin, the sin of all sins, the bottomless sadness and tragedy of our nominal Christianity.

If we realize this, then we may understand what Easter is and why it needs and presupposes Lent. For we may then understand that the liturgical traditions of the Church, all its cycles and services, exist, first of all, in order to help us recover the vision and the taste of that *new life* which we so easily lose and betray, so that we may repent and return to it. How can we love and desire something that we do not know? How can we put above everything else in our life

something which we have not seen and enjoyed? In short: how can we seek a Kingdom of which we have no idea? It is the worship of the Church that was from the very beginning and still is our entrance into, our communion with, the *new life of the Kingdom*. It is through her liturgical life that the Church reveals to us something of that which "the ear has not heard, the eye has not seen, and what has not yet entered the heart of man, but which God has prepared for those who love Him." And in the center of that liturgical life, as its heart and climax, as the sun whose rays penetrate everywhere, stands *Pascha*. It is the door opened every year into the splendor of Christ's Kingdom, the foretaste of the eternal joy that awaits us, the glory of the victory which already, although invisibly, fills the whole creation: "death is no more!" The entire worship of the Church is organized around Easter, and therefore the liturgical year, i.e., the sequence of seasons and feasts, becomes a journey, a pilgrimage towards Pascha, the *End*, which at the same time is the *Beginning*: the end of all that which is "old"; the beginning of the new life, a constant "passage" from "this world" into the Kingdom already revealed in Christ.

And yet the "old" life, that of sin and pettiness, is not easily overcome and changed. The Gospel expects and requires from man an effort of which, in his present state, he is virtually incapable. We are challenged with a vision, a goal, a way of life that is so much above our possibilities! For even the Apostles, when they heard their Master's teaching, asked Him in despair: "but how is this possible?" It is not easy, indeed, to reject a petty ideal of life made up of daily cares, of search for material goods, security, and pleasure, for an ideal life in which nothing short of perfection is the goal: "be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." This world through all its "media" says: be happy, take it easy, follow the broad way. Christ in the Gospel says: choose the narrow way, fight and suffer, for this is the road to the only genuine happiness. And unless the Church helps, how can we make that awful choice, how can we *repent* and *return* to the glorious promise given us each year at Easter? This is where Great Lent comes in. This is the help extended to us by the Church, the school of repentance which alone will make it possible to receive Easter not as

mere permission to eat, to drink, and to relax, but indeed as the end of the "old" in us, as our entrance into the "new."

In the early Church, the main purpose of Lent was to prepare the "catechumen," i.e., the newly converted Christians, for baptism which at that time was performed during the Paschal liturgy. But even when the Church rarely baptized adults and the institution of the catechumenate disappeared, the basic meaning of Lent remained the same. For even though we are baptized, what we constantly lose and betray is precisely that which we received at Baptism. Therefore Easter is our return every year to our own Baptism, whereas Lent is our preparation for that return — the slow and sustained effort to perform, at the end, our own "passage" or "pascha" into the new life in Christ. If, as we shall see, lenten worship preserves even today

its catechetical and baptismal character, it is not as "archaeological" remains of the past, but as something valid and essential for us. For each year Lent and Easter are, once again, the rediscovery and the recovery by us of what we were made through our own baptismal death and resurrection.

A journey, a pilgrimage! Yet, as we begin it, as we make the first step into the "bright sadness" of Lent, we see — far, far away — the destination. It is the joy of Easter, it is the entrance into the glory of the Kingdom. And it is this vision, the foretaste of Easter, that makes Lent's sadness bright and our lenten effort a "spiritual spring." The night may be dark and long, but all along the way a mysterious and radiant dawn seems to shine on the horizon. "Do not deprive us of our expectation, O Lover of man!"

The Triodion

from Great Lent

by Alexander Schmemmann

Great Lent has its own liturgical book — *The Lenten Triodion*. It contains hymns and biblical readings for every day of the lenten season beginning with the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee and ending with Vespers of Great and Holy Saturday. The hymns of the Triodion were composed in the main part after the virtual disappearance of the Catechumenate i.e., adult baptism and the necessity of preparing candidates for it). Their emphasis, therefore, is not on Baptism but on repentance. Unfortunately very few people today know and understand the unique beauty and depth of this lenten hymnography. The ignorance of the *Triodion* is the principal cause of the slow transformation of the very understanding of Lent, of its purpose and meaning — a transformation which took place little by little in the Christian mentality and reduced Lent to a juridical "obligation" and a set of dietary laws. The real inspiration and challenge of Lent is all but lost today and there is no other way toward

its recovery but by an attentive listening to the hymns of the *Triodion*. It is significant, for example, how often these hymns warn precisely against a "formal" and, therefore, hypocritical understanding of fasting. As early as Cheese-Fare Wednesday we hear:

In vain do you rejoice in not eating, O soul!
For you abstain from food,
But from passions you are not purified.
If you have no desire for improvement,
You will be despised as a lie in the eyes of God,
You will be likened to evil demons who never eat!
If you persevere in sin, you will perform a
useless fast;
Therefore, remain in constant striving so as to
stand before the Crucified Savior, or rather,
To be crucified with the One who was crucified
for your sake!

And again on Wednesday of the Fourth Week, we hear:

Those who thirst for spiritual blessings
Perform their good deeds in secret,

Not noising them abroad in markets,
But ceaselessly pray in the depths of our hearts:
For He who sees all that is done in secret,
Will reward us for our abstinence.
Let us fulfill the fast without sad faces,
But ceaselessly pray in the depths of our hearts:
Our Father, who art in heave,
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

Throughout the whole Lent, the opposition of the Publican's humility to the Pharisee's boasting and self-glorification is stressed in hymns, while hypocrisy is denounced. But what then is the real fast? The *Triodion* answers: It is first of all an inner purification:

Let us fast, O faithful, from corrupting snares,
from harmful passions,
So that we may acquire life from the divine
cross and return with the good thief to our
initial home...

It is also a return to love, a fight against
"broken life," against hatred, injustice, envy:

While fasting physically, brothers, Let us also
fast spiritually;
Let us loose every knot of iniquity,
Let us tear up every unrighteous bond,
Let us distribute bread to the hungry and
welcome to our homes those who have no
roof over their heads,
So that we may receive great mercy from Christ
our God.

Come, O faithful,
Let us perform the works of God in the light;
Let us walk honestly as in the day.
Let us rid ourselves of unjust accusations against
our neighbors so that we place no stumbling
block in their way.
Let us put aside the pleasures of the flesh so that
we may increase the grace of our souls.
Let us give bread to those in need.
Let us draw near in repentance to Christ and say:
O, our God! Have mercy on us...

As we listen to that, how far we are from the petty and Pharisaic understanding of Lent which prevails today and which views it exclusively in negative terms, as a kind of "inconvenience" which, if we voluntarily accept it and "suffer through it," will automatically credit us with "merits" and achieve our "good standing" with God. How many people have accepted the idea that Lent is the time when something which may be good in itself is *forbidden*, as if God were taking pleasure in torturing us. For the authors of lenten hymns, however, Lent is exactly the opposite; it is a return to the "normal" life, to

that "fasting" which Adam and Eve broke, thus introducing suffering and death into the world. Lent is greeted, therefore, as a spiritual spring, as a time of joy and light:

The lenten spring has come,
The light of repentance...

Let us receive the announcement of Lent with
joy!

For if our forefather Adam had kept the fast,
We would not have been deprived of paradise...

The time of Lent is a time of gladness!
With radiant purity and pure love,
Filled with resplendent prayer and all good
deeds,

Let us sing with joy...

Only those who "rejoice in the Lord," and for whom Christ and His Kingdom are the ultimate desire and joy of their existence, can joyfully accept the fight against evil and sin and partake of the final victory. This is why of all the categories of Saints, only *martyrs* are invoked and praised in special hymns every day in Lent. For martyrs are precisely those who preferred Christ to everything in this world including life itself, who rejoiced so much in Christ that they could say, as St. Ignatius of Antioch while dying said: Now I begin to live..." They are the *witnesses* of the Kingdom of God because only those who have seen it and tasted of it are capable of that ultimate surrender. They are our companions, our inspiration during Lent which is our fight for the victory of the divine, the heavenly, and the eternal in us.

Breathing one hope, beholding one sight,
You, suffering martyrs, found death to be the
way of life...

Dressed in the armor of faith,
Armed with the sign of the Cross,
You were soldiers worthy of God!
Manfully you opposed the tortures,
Crushing the Devil's deceits;
Victors you were, worthy of crowns.
Pray to Christ that He save our souls...

Throughout the forty days, it is the Cross of Christ and His Resurrection, and the radiant joy of Pascha that constitute the supreme "term of reference" of all lenten hymnography, a constant reminder that however narrow and difficult the way, it ultimately leads to Christ's table in His Kingdom. As I said already, the expectation and foretaste of the Paschal joy permeates the entire Lent, and is the real motivation of lenten effort.

Fasting: Behold, Now is the Acceptable Time...

by Vladimir Ivlenko, St. Xenia Press, Melbourne, Australia

The main aim of a Christian life is union with God; to know God and not simply to know of God. Initially, Adam and Eve had this union with God. When Adam and Eve fell and did not repent they severed themselves from this pure and holy union in which they were created and instead became subject to corruption and evil. How did Adam and Eve sin and cause this immense burden to fall upon all the generations of man? Was it not by disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Hence, even in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were commanded by God to fast, to abstain. They could eat anything they desired except from this one tree (Gen. 2:16, 17). We have inherited this original sin of Adam and now our bodies are subject to corruption and our souls to defilement.

How can we return to the blissful state that Adam and Eve enjoyed before they fell? God has shown a way through Redemption, by giving us Commandments, a way of life, and most of all His Son, Jesus Christ, Who has become our Guide and Savior (John 14:6). If we follow these Commandments and Christ's way, then not only will we be eternally saved in the dreadful Judgement Day, but even here and now, it is possible for us to unite with God and dwell in a state of spiritual bliss (John 14:25). But we will never know this joyful state unless we earnestly and sincerely strive to fulfill all of God's Commandments.

One of the most powerful weapons that God has given us to overcome our fallen physical and spiritual states is fasting. When we search the Scriptures we find that fasting was practiced by all who reached lofty spiritual states-- prophets, apostles, righteous men, etc. These people became great not from birth, but by obeying God's Commandments, one of which was abstinence. Most of all, Christ Himself not

only instructed us to fast (Matt. 17:21; Mark 2:20) but fasted Himself (Matt. 4:2) and set us an example to imitate (I Cor. 11:1; Eph. 5:1). Why is fasting so beneficial? Let us examine this question from both the physical and the spiritual aspects.

To most of us who live a very lowly spiritual existence, the physical benefits of fasting are far easier to understand and experience. Medical science has proven that if our bodies abstain from certain foods and from excess food, we can enjoy better health; we feel more active and alert; our eyes become clearer, we sleep better, our digestive system functions more effectively, physical tasks become easier, etc. It has been shown that vegetarians live far healthier and longer lives. We have all heard about the benefits of various diets which are "low in cholesterol", "high in fiber", "meat free", etc.

By total abstinence from all food for several days, some diseases have been cured for which modern medicine could do nothing. By fasting, our physical bodies aim at becoming more and more like Adam and Eve's before they fell.

Remember, Adam and Eve ate no meat, fish or dairy products in the Garden of Eden, only vegetarian foods.

The most important benefits of fasting, however, are spiritual. Here it is difficult to generalize because each person when fasting will be granted a different experience depending on God's grace and the requirements of the person's spirit. In all cases though, the spiritual benefits of fasting lead to God-pleasing virtues and contribute enormously to our salvation. Here are some examples of the spiritual benefits of fasting that we may all experience through God's grace if we earnestly and sincerely try to fast:

1. We become more conscious of our sins thus leading us to confession, repentance and a desire to reform. Even past forgotten and unrepentant sins may be recalled.

2. We become more tolerant, less argumentative, more inclined to forgive others and not seek revenge or envy.

3. We become more steadfast in fighting and resisting passions like gluttony, drunkenness, lust, covetousness, etc. **The Holy Fathers teach that gluttony is the prime cause of all sinful passions and hence fasting is the most direct weapon against it.**

4. Slothfulness and listlessness are overcome and we are prompted and helped to pray more fervently, to stand longer in church, to be more attentive.

5. Compassion develops and we become more loving and generous to our neighbors, wanting to do good and help them. We become more sensitive to the needs of others and care less about our own pride and vanity.

6. We become more perceptive to the frightfully fallen and debauched state of the world. This leads us even more to seek our own salvation and to pray for the salvation of others.

These are all virtues which bring us closer and closer to union with God and closer to the spiritual state that Adam and Eve had before they fell. Unless we earnestly strive to fast, we will never experience the mysterious and joyful way in which God's grace works in us, no matter how virtuous we may think we are.

But fasting alone is not enough. This we can see in the many present-day sects and so-called religions, where very strict fasts are sometimes practiced. Why then do not the followers of these sects receive the same benefits and God's grace that we Orthodox can obtain? **The answer lies in prayer. Fasting must be combined with prayer: prayer to the one true God: Father, Son and Holy**

Spirit, Consubstantial and Undivided Trinity.

God gave us only one Church, one belief and one religion and this Truth has been preserved undefiled and unshattered throughout the centuries in Orthodoxy (Matt. 16:18), Christ taught us both to pray and to fast since this is the only way by which the demons-evil and sin--may be expelled (Matt. 17:14-21) and by which we may come to know God and obtain eternal salvation (John 6:40). If we try to pray without fasting, our prayers will be weak, without progress, without the fervor, concentration and contrition that is so pleasing to God. If we try to fast without proper prayer, we will become proud, vainglorious, thinking that we are better than others (Luke 18:9-14), despising, even nervous and irritable. Either way our last state will be worse than the first and our spiritual development will be greatly hindered.

Prayer and fasting mutually benefit one another. Fasting enhances prayer and prayer strengthens us in fasting. Fasting implies not only abstinence from certain types and quantities of foods, but abstinence from all sinful inclinations, actions and thoughts. Just as prayer helps fasting, so fasting in food greatly increases our ability to abstain from sin.

When we consider how many different foods are available today compared to the times of our forefathers, we truly have no excuse not to fast. Instead, we should look forward to periods of fasting as periods in our lives when we can, through God's grace, store up for ourselves imperishable treasures in Heaven (Matt. 6:20) and come closer to the original, undefiled state of men.

What simpler way has God given us to obtain eternal salvation and a peaceful life here on earth than by prayer and fasting?



From the Fathers on *Vanity*:

- ✧ A vain person is someone who struggles to obtain virtues and good deeds for his own sake rather than for the sake of God, and desires to receive the short-lived praise of men. – **St. Maximos the Confessor**
- ✧ Those who acquire good deeds for the sake of glory suffer, for they, having received a token for life in the heavens, send their glory to the dust... – **St. Gregory The Theologian**
- ✧ How close are vanity and pride? “The difference between these two passions is like the difference between a youth and a man, wheat and bread; for vanity is the beginning and pride is the end result. Controlling the tongue and love of dishonor are the first steps to be taken in order to conquer vanity. – **St. John Climacus**
- ✧ Do not love glory and do not allow your heart to entertain self-praise. Train your tongue to say “forgive me” and you will become humble. – **St. Anthony The Great**
- ✧ The vainglorious man is an idolator, although he is called a believer. He thinks that he is honoring God, but in actual fact he is pleasing not God, but men. – **St. John Climacus**
- ✧ Sometimes undertakings good in appearance lead to their accomplishment for the sake of glory and human praise, but in God’s sight this is equal to untruth, thievery and other sins. – **St. Macarios the Great**
- ✧ The slave of glory cannot be the slave of God. – **St. John Chrysostom**
- ✧ Your heart will feel peace if you humble yourself. – **St. Poemen The Great**
- ✧ Outward glory increases inward ignominy, and imaginary health, inspiring the thought in a man that he really is healthy, does not permit him to apply treatment. – **St. Isidore of Pelusium**

✧ **From the Desert:** An elder was asked, “Why am I continually negligent?”

And he answered, “Because you have not seen the signs along the road.”

The elders used to say,

“Say to every thought that comes to you, ‘Do you belong to us, or to our enemies?’ and it will confess.”

The Need for Fasting

In 1955 in a labour camp in Soviet Russia, the time was approaching for the release of the prisoners. Everyone prayed in expectation and one of the prisoners, a priest, gave the following sermon: "We all know that Saint Nicholas is a great intercessor, helper and miracle worker. He even helped people of other faiths. Let us therefore pray to Saint Nicholas for our release and let us keep a three day fast before his feast day". Forty of the camp inmates agreed to do this and for three days before the feast of the translation of the relics of Saint Nicholas (22nd of March according to the civil calendar), they proposed to eat nothing at all, although camp conditions were severe. When the time came to keep the fast, only 26 of the prisoners observed the fast, plus the priest who communed them during this time. On the feast day of the saint, news arrived of the release of the prisoners. Only 27 names appeared on the release document. How devastated were those who had abandoned the fast!

Whenever a fast approaches, people look at the minimum that they can do. Instead we should always look at the maximum and recognize our weakness and lack of faith. And indeed those who look at the minimum tend in the long run to abandon fasting altogether. The Wednesday fast is an example. This fast day should be observed the same as the Friday fast.!

Fasting is a law of the Church. Not to keep the law of the Church requires a special reason. If such a reason exists it is because the Church reaches out to meet our needs and weaknesses in many ways. For example, sick people are not expected to keep a strict fast. This also applied to travellers, especially in the days when travel was long and hazardous. A dispensation from fasting was usually to allow the weary traveller to eat an extra meal, for journeys were long and people had to walk or ride great distances. Today of course there is no need for a dispensation when you can recline in the seat of an aircraft (order a vegetarian meal - editor's note) and 11 hours later arrive at your destination no worse for wear. We should never use this former travel dispensation to indulge our appetite.

Unfortunately many people say "It is all the same to God whether I eat potatoes or ham". Of course God does not need your fast, but you should understand that the fast is for you. God does not need to fast. It is you, who are overfed, that needs to fast. Saint Seraphim of Sarov says that he who does not keep the fast is not a Christian. Let us therefore acknowledge our weakness to please our stomachs and refrain from the hypocrisy of denying the law of the Church. If we cannot keep the maximum, let us confess it. Never say that fasting is a new invention or that it is not necessary. If you keep the fast then you will know what benefits God bestows on them that truly love Him and keep His commandments.

A Vision of St. Carpus

St. Carpus was a friend of Saint Paul. We read his name in 2 Timothy 4: 13, a single verse that shows a kind of homey closeness between them. Paul tells Timothy, when he comes, to "bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments." Paul trusted Carpus to keep and care for his personal possessions--things he needed and valued.

Paul gave Carpus the position of Bishop of Varna in Thrace, an area which includes parts of modern Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey. Carpus also preached in Crete, where he met Dionysius the Areopagite. It is Dionysius who tells us that Carpus received many heavenly visions, especially when he was preparing to serve the Divine Liturgy.

Dionysius recorded what Carpus told him about one vision—the most memorable one he ever had, because it taught him an unforgettable lesson about Jesus Christ. Carpus said that there were two men with whom he was very angry. One of them, not a believer, had "led astray to ungodliness a certain member of the Church." Then both of them did things that harmed and mocked the faith.

Carpus blamed himself for not trying to convert the "leader" and not attempting to bring the former Church member back to the truth. He said that he should have spent the rest of his life warning them that their conduct was putting them in spiritual danger. But in spite of this, he remained angry. He prayed that

God would put them to death for what they were doing.

The vision given to Carpus had two parts. When he looked up he saw Jesus Christ surrounded by angels, a scene full of light and beauty. But when he looked down, he saw a "yawning and dark chasm." The two men "upon whom he had invoked a curse" crouched unsteadily on the slippery edge of the chasm, struggling to keep from falling into it. There were serpents "creeping up and gliding from underneath," trying to pull the men down while biting them and piercing their skin.

Carpus admitted that he took a certain pleasure in this terrible scene. Not only that, but as he looked at it he could easily forget the heavenly beauty he'd seen first.

But then he saw Jesus Christ and the angels again. The Lord rose from His "super-celestial throne" and descended, stretching out His hand to pull the two men out of danger. Carpus heard Him say, "Here I am, ready to be crucified again for the salvation of mankind."

Then Christ spoke again, in what seemed to be a warning to Carpus about his own sin--the sin of praying for others to die: "But see, whether it is well for you to exchange the dwelling in the chasm, and with serpents, for [a dwelling] with God, and the good and philanthropic angels."

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