

St. George Newsletter

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Third letter from exile

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It is not I, your father, but other priests of God with you, my children, that enter into the great and holy fast. I know, O Lord, that a man's path is not according to his will, that he is not powerful enough to direct his own steps (Jer. 10:23), but in human terms, I wanted to spend this fast -- the fast of renewal of my priesthood, when the menaion is joined to the triodion in the way it was in the year of my ordination -- in my own family of repentance.

Do you feel, dear ones, how my soul wakes to the church, and how evening, morning, and at noonday (Ps. 54:18) my spirit strives for all of you? The Lord has joined you to me.

I am unworthy, and more sinful than all, but I am a pastor, and my heart is poured out, poured out until the end (Ps. 136:7) in my separation from you. You are my breath, you are my life, you are my joy. You do not hide the Lord from me, but reveal Him. You do not make him distant, but bring him near. Through you I have known the Lord; in you, He has revealed Himself to me. With you and on your behalf I lift up my prayers to Him.

Serving you, I served Him. I saw your beauty formed in the image of God. I was lifted up to his ineffable goodness; knowing your sins, I wept over my own sins. Knowing your correction, I was ashamed before Him and asked His help for the correction of my own sinful life. In a word, for many years I have been coming to Him through you. All of you are in my heart.

You are my path to Christ. How can I go on now without you? With eyes filled with tears, I whisper the words of the prayer, "Let Thy will, O

Lord, be done in me, a sinner." Do not forget me! Remember what I taught you, though I was unworthy.

Most of all, remain in oneness of spirit, in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1-3). Remember, that funeral hymns also await you who are free now. Let each return to his work, forget that which divided, and unite to this end. The end crowns the labors.

Go out as one, wash yourselves and be clean. Lighten my cross by the joy of your repentance. As best I could, I taught it to you, though I was unworthy. The most joyful day for me was always the day of entry into the fast, the day of Adam's fall. This is when I most clearly saw the Lord in you.

Pray for me in this great day. Ask forgiveness for me from the Father. I believe that there are no great distances on the whole earth. Christ is mighty to gather the dispersed into union. On this day, we will be together in spirit, and you, going out from the house of God, bow to my venerable ones: my earthy angel and my patron, asking them to receive your repentance.

The Lord will revive my memory, and from here I bless all of you. Forgive your father, who once fell at your feet asking forgiveness, the sinful and unworthy priest Sergei. By the prayers of our most-pure, most-blessed, glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, and the intercessions of our father among the saints Nicholas, archbishop of Myra in Lycia, of St. Sergius the abbot of Radonezh, the wonderworker, of St. Theodosius of Totma, the wonderworker, of St. Seraphim of Sarov, the wonderworker, of St. Pimen the Great, St. Theodore the Studite, and your holy guardian angels, may the blessing of the Lord be with you throughout the whole fast. Amen.

About Lenten Services

Weekends

The Saturday and Sunday services during Great Lent differ very little from the usual Saturday and Sunday services. On Saturday nights after the Gospel we sing "Open unto me the doors of repentance" instead of the usual "By the prayers of the apostles...". On Sundays, we serve the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great instead of that of St. John Chrysostom. Since the authors of the Liturgy wrote the priest's prayers, and not the texts that the choir sings, this is not very noticeable. However, the priest's prayers at the Liturgy of St. Basil are more detailed. Instead of "It is truly meet...", the choir sings the beautiful "All of creation rejoices in thee...". Basically, we do not feel any of the liturgical features of Great Lent if we come to services only on Sunday mornings. We do not do prostrations in church from Friday after the Presanctified until Sunday evenings.

The First Week

At the evening services on the first four days of Great Lent, we read in four parts the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete. This is a penitential canon filled with scriptural references. We read it to enter into the penitential state of mind in which we spend Great Lent. Lent is not a time of sadness, but a time of changing our lives to live more in accordance with God's will. As such, we find that with more prayer and less attention to rich foods, our souls and bodies are lighter, and Lent is a joyful time. These services of the first week in the evenings (where we also sing the Great Compline) are essential to starting of Lent.

In the first week there are also morning services every day. These are lengthy services punctuated with the prayer of St. Ephraim which is characteristic of Great Lent. For those who are able to take the time, these services also attune a person to Lent. The departed are commemorated at each of these services.

On Saturday of the first week, we commemorate the miracle of St. Theodore the Tyro. This begins after the Presanctified Liturgy on Friday morning, where we read his canon

and bless kollivo (boiled wheat with honey). It is a long tradition of the Church that everyone prepare Friday evening to come to communion on the first Saturday of Lent, having prepared throughout the week. Unfortunately, many ignore this tradition in our days and allow themselves to be caught up in other bustle on this day. We should work to return to the traditions of our church and prepare ourselves throughout the first week and commune on Saturday morning.

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts

The full Liturgy with transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ was considered by the Church fathers to be too festive for Lenten days. However, so that we would not be deprived of communion on these days, twice a week (plus some additional holidays) the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts is served. At this Liturgy, we commune of communion reserved at the previous Sunday Liturgy. The Presanctified Gifts differ in no way from ordinary communion, and we prepare to receive them in the same way. Since there is no consecration, there is no commemoration, and we do not send in commemoration slips and prosphora at these Liturgies.

The Other Weeks

The Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts continues to be served with preparatory services. On Friday evenings, we remember the departed. In the fifth week on Wednesday we read the Great Canon in full, and on Friday we sing the Akathist to the Mother of God.

Everyday life during Lent

What should we do during Lent? What changes should we make?

The “rules” are simple. During Lent, we fast from eating meat and dairy, and avoid wine except on weekends. On the Annunciation and Palm Sunday we eat fish.

But as the services of Lent remind us, “The Kingdom of God is not food and drink.” The external discipline of Lent exists to help us focus on our inward journey. Lent is a time when we travel with Christ to His death and resurrection.

How, then, should the arrangement of our spiritual lives change during Lent? Ideally, not very much! The same spiritual exercises we take on during Lent are appropriate for every time of the year. But to be frank, people often find more energy and focus during Lent. Let us consider some possibilities:

1. Church services. This is the most important aspect of Lent (yes, even more so than the fasting!). This aspect of our spiritual life does change in Lent, simply because there are more services available to attend. The previous page described some of them. During Lent, we should be extra diligent in our usual attendance on Sundays and Saturday nights, and even the busiest of us should try to make time to come at least one additional time during the week, perhaps to a Wednesday Presanctified or a Friday Memorial Service. During the first week, many people observe the fast very strictly. This is also honorable and beneficial, but not nearly as beneficial as observing the fast without extra strictness, but attending each of the readings of the Great Canon during the first week. Lent is meant to be an especially penitential time, so we should also take the opportunity to go to confession and communion.

2. Prayers at home. Due to the increased number of services in church, we often do not pray as much at home during Lent. However,

on mornings or evenings that we do not spend in church, we should use this time to build up our spiritual discipline of prayer. Prayer begins as work, and as responsibility. But as it is communication with our Creator, we all understand that it should be a favorite time. But at first it is difficult. As we progress, the discipline will become something we look forward to. Work during Lent to pray as soon as you get up, preferably from the prayer book, but in your own words if time is short. Remember to thank God at the end of the day as well.

- 3. Fasting.** In a response to a question of the Pharisees about fasting, the Lord said “One does not put new wine in old wineskins”. Saying this, he meant that a renewal of soul is necessary before entering into ascetic practices. We should not take on heavy fasting without consulting with a priest. The ordinary fast of keeping vegan (although the church generally allows shellfish on fasting days) is relatively easy in our days. A number of “fake” foods are available for those who like to eat certain types of foods. Although a fast closer to the spirit of fasting would also exclude these “fake” foods, we should not be afraid of using them during the fast. The very action of choosing a soy burger over real meat or dark chocolate instead of milk chocolate helps to remind us that we are in the fast. We also must remember that fasting is means to an end, and that our fasting prepares us to repent and receive communion.
- 4. Other abstinences.** It is a good idea to limit our consumption of television, movies, video games, and the like during Lent. These things can be habit forming, and Lent is about the freedom that comes from repentance and life in Christ (yes, in spite of the fasting rules, which are in place to help free us from attachments to certain foods!), and is at odds with dependence. Lent is a good time to work on problems we may have with drugs, smoking, or overuse of alcohol as well.
- 5. In the Gospel, Christ tells that if a demon is driven out of a man, but the house is left**

empty, the demon will return with seven others. So if we take it upon ourselves to fast from some of the items mentioned in the previous point, we need to fill up that time. No better use of that time can be found than serving others. Do we have the financial means to help the poor? Can we find the time to visit the lonely? It is also a good idea to have some sort of spiritual discipline of learning more about our faith. In advance of Lent, we can prepare for ourselves a program of scripture reading, perhaps reading all the Gospels, perhaps reading just one, or going further and reading the whole New Testament. Maybe a spiritual book has been sitting on our shelves that we should read a little a day during Lent. We should spend more time with our children, teaching them about the Church and this time of fasting.

At the Pascha service, the difference is visible: those who have kept the fast stand with joy, meeting the risen Lord. Those who have not stand with stern faces, not understanding what is going on around them. Let us learn in advance the meaning of Easter through our Lenten studies and labors.

The unjudging monk

St. Anastasius of Sinai relates the following: There was a monk who lived in carelessness and laziness. He fell victim to a serious disease and was near to death. In the monastery where he lived, there was a custom to gather all the brethren around a dying monk and not to leave his side until he breathed his last breath. According to this custom, all the monks gathered around this monk, and were not a little surprised by his countenance. He died with absolutely no fear of death, with thanks to God and with a glad countenance. They said, "Brother, we know that you lived your life carelessly; tell us, what brings you joy in this hour of death?" The monk replied, "That is true, honorable fathers, I lived my life carelessly, but this is what happened: I was at God's judgment seat, and the angels brought out the list of my sins, read them to me, and asked, 'Do you know that these are your sins?' I know, I said, but from the time that I rejected the world and

became a monk, that I never judged anyone, and held no evil towards anyone. Thus, I pray the Lord that He would fulfill His words in me: Judge not, lest ye be judged. Forgive, and it will be forgiven you." And as soon as I said that, the angels tore up the list of my sins, and thus I am not at all worried, but with joy go to my Lord." Having said this, the monk died peacefully. In view of this mercy of God on the brother, let us, O brethren, imitate him, and turn our eyes away from our brothers' sins. Instead of looking at others sins, let us analyze our own weaknesses. From this, humility will grow in us, and with humility, we will grow closer to God. And when we grow closer to God, then we will receive forgiveness of all our sins and become inheritors of the heavenly kingdom.

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