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ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR THE GREAT FAST 2024

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Beloved Members of our Diocesan Family:
Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!

As our Holy Orthodox Church ushers in the sacred season of Lent on this Sunday of Forgiveness, we all do well reviewing in our minds and renewing in our lives the true meaning of the Great Fast.

Just as the children of Israel ate the “bread of affliction” (Deuteronomy 16:3) in preparation for the Feast of Passover, so Christians prepare themselves for the celebration of the Feast of Feasts, Holy Pascha, by observing the Fast of Great Lent. Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28), and Elijah on Mount Horeb (III Kingdoms 19:5-9). But most importantly, the Lord Jesus Christ fasted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights (Matthew 4:1-2), and we imitate His example.

Indeed, Our Savior stressed fasting in His teaching of His disciples and apostles. Across the centuries, He instructs us: “When the Bridegroom is taken away, My disciples will fast” (Matthew 9:15). And He presumes that His followers will fast in His Sermon on the Mount when He teaches – not “*if*” you fast – but, “When you fast ...”. And, He admonishes us not to draw attention to our fasting efforts, but to keep a peaceful and humble disposition before our neighbors: “Anoint your head and wash your face so that you do not appear to be fasting before men ... and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matthew 5:16-18).

Although abstaining from meat and dairy products and other rich foods has many health benefits, the primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence on God. We voluntarily experience physical hunger in order to become aware of our true spiritual hunger. Another reason we fast is to subdue our passions and our self-will. The Saints tell us that there is no way we can control our urges for pleasure, money, or power, if we cannot control our stomach. Fasting is the first step toward self-control. And our self-will is cut off when we choose, instead of following every appetite and impulse, to be obedient to the Church and her rules.

Furthermore, fasting is more than a matter of diet. It is moral as well as physical. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal Son to our Father's house. In the words of Saint John Chrysostom, fasting means "abstinence not only from food but from sins." He says, "The fast should be kept not only by the mouth but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and the other members of the body." The eye must abstain from impure sights; the ear, from malicious gossip; the hands, from acts of injustice or impurity; the feet, from going places where we know that the Lord would not bless us to go.

Saint Basil the Great tells us, "It is useless to fast from food and yet indulge in cruel criticism and slander: You do not eat meat – yet, you devour your brother." And although we may return to eating meat and cheese after Pascha comes, we should of course strive NOT to return to the sins from which we struggled to abstain during the course of the Fast. We give up rich foods for Lent ... but we should give up gossip, anger, laziness and greed, forever.

The deepest meaning of fasting is best summed up with this famous triad: prayer – fasting – and almsgiving. *Fasting has no value if not combined with prayer.* In the Gospel, Our Lord tells us that the devil is cast out by "prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21); and the Acts of the Apostles records that the early Christians "fasted and prayed" (Acts 13:3). The Great Fast is certainly a time to improve our prayer life, both personally at home, and by our faithful participation in Lenten services at church.

Finally, prayer and fasting should be accompanied by almsgiving – by love for others, expressed in practical form. The second century Shepherd of Hermas insists that the money saved from abstaining from rich foods during the Fast should be given to the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Lent is certainly the time to increase our works of mercy for "the least of His brethren," for those who are in need.

So, as we begin Great Lent, let our hearts sing out this hymn of the Church, from the Vespers of Forgiveness Sunday:

Let us set out with joy upon the season of the Fast, and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us purify our soul and cleanse our flesh; and as we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit, may we persevere with love.

My beloved in Christ, I pray that this year you will experience the holiest Lent ever, in which you draw closer than ever before to our Crucified and Risen Lord, the One Who loves you more than you love yourself.

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing, and my sincere love,

+ Archbishop Michael

Archbishop of New York and the Diocese of New York and New Jersey