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ARCHPASTORAL LETTER
FOR THE GREAT FAST 2026

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Sunday, February 22, 2026

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

"Let us begin the Lenten journey with joy! Let us give ourselves to spiritual efforts. Let us cleanse our souls. Let us cleanse our flesh. Let us fast from passions as we fast from foods, taking pleasure in the good words of the Spirit, and accomplishing them in love, that we all may be made worthy to see the passion of Christ our God and His Holy Pascha, rejoicing with spiritual joy." (Lenten Hymn for Clean Monday)

As we enter the season of Great Lent, we are once again invited to the spiritual arena, not to despair over our sins, but to experience the purifying joy of repentance. The Holy Church provides us with three essential wings to lift our souls from the earthly world to the heavenly realm: Fasting, Prayer, and Almsgiving. Let us focus on this triad of virtue, as each of us begins our personal pilgrimage to Holy Pascha.

Fasting is not merely a dietary change, but a voluntary abstinence from food for the purpose of spiritual refinement and curbing the passions of the flesh. Saint John Chrysostom tells us, "The value of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in the withdrawal from sinful practices." True fasting strengthens the spirit and humbles the body, allowing us to focus on the Kingdom of God rather than temporal comforts. As we refrain from animal products, let us also refrain from malice, gossip, and judging our brothers and sisters.

However: Without **prayer,** fasting is merely a diet. In Lent, we are called to intensify our personal, family, and public prayer. Christ taught us to go into our inner room to pray (Matthew 6:6), and the Church offers us additional services such as the Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete and the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, and the profound penitential prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian as a guide. Saint Theophan the Recluse instructs us that "prayer is the communion of our heart with God." Let us fill our hearts and homes with the "sweet spiritual fragrance" of our daily prayers – along with the reading of the Scriptures, especially the Psalter, lifting our minds toward heaven.

Finally, fasting and prayer must bear fruit in love, manifested through **almsgiving**. "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). True fasting is accompanied by generosity. Saint Basil the Great instructs us to share our bread with the hungry and take the homeless into our homes. Almsgiving is the cure for greed and the expression of our

love for Christ, Who dwells in the hungry, the sick, and the stranger (Matthew 25:40). Let our fasting generate savings that we turn into charitable giving, reaching out to those in need with a spirit of humility.

There is a story handed down from the tradition of the desert fathers: In an ancient monastery, a young monk boasted to his elder that he was fasting strictly, eating only bread and water. The elder, known for his wisdom, replied, "It is easy to starve the body, brother. But tell me, while you are starving, do you still speak ill of your brother? Do you still harbor anger in your heart?"

The young monk was silent. The elder said, "Then you are merely hungry, not fasting. The fast is not about the food that enters the mouth, but the sins that come out of it. A true fast means not eating meat, but also not chewing on the reputation of your neighbor. It is curbing the belly, but more importantly, opening the heart to love and charity."

Great Lent is like a "workshop" where the character of the faithful is spiritually uplifted and strengthened; where one's life is rededicated to the principles and ideals of the Gospel; where the inner conviction of our faith is fanned like a flame into the transformation of our very life, and where apathy and disinterest are stirred up into vigorous activities of prayer, worship, and good works.

Lent is not for the sake of Lent itself, as fasting is not for the sake of fasting. But they are means by which, and for which, we who believe in the Gospel prepare ourselves to reach for, accept and attain the calling of our Redeemer.

Beloved, let us undertake the Lenten journey not with a somber countenance, but with the joy of returning to our Father's house. May God strengthen us to fight the good fight, that we may worthily celebrate the glorious Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

On this Sunday of Forgiveness, I ask your forgiveness if I have in any way angered or hurt you, disappointed or frustrated you, upset or failed to help or protect you and your loved ones. Please, forgive me, a sinner.

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