26/02/2025

# CATECHETICAL HOMILY FOR THE OPENING OF HOLY AND GREAT LENT (2025)



+ B A R T H O L O M E W

BY GOD’S MERCY

ARCHBISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE – NEW ROME

AND ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH

TO THE PLENITUDE OF THE CHURCH

MAY THE GRACE AND PEACE

OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST,

TOGETHER WITH OUR PRAYER, BLESSING AND FORGIVENESS BE WITH ALL

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Most honorable brother Hierarchs and blessed children in the Lord,

Once again, with the will and grace of God the giver of all good things, we are entering Holy and Great Lent, the blessed period of fasting and repentance, of spiritual vigilance and journey with the Lord, as He comes to His voluntary passion, in order to reach the veneration of His splendid Resurrection and become worthy of our own passage from earthly things to “that which no eyes have seen and no ears have heard and no human heart has ascended” (1 Cor. 2.9).

In the early Church, Holy and Great Lent was a period of preparation of catechumens, whose baptism took place during the Divine Liturgy of the Paschal Feast. This connection with baptism is also preserved by the comprehension and experience of Great Lent as the period par excellence of repentance that is described as “a renewal of baptism,” “a second baptism,” “a contract with God for a second life,” in other words a regeneration of the gifts of baptism and promise to God for the beginning of a new way of life. The services and hymns of this season associate the spiritual struggle of the faithful with the expectation of the Lord’s Pascha, whereby the forty-day fast radiates the fragrance of the paschal joy.

Holy and Great Lent is an opportunity to become conscious of the depth and wealth of our faith as “a personal encounter with Christ.” It is rightly emphasized that Christianity is “extremely personal,” without this implying that it is “individualistic.” The faithful “encounter, recognize, and love one and the same Christ,” who, “alone and only, revealed the true and perfect human person” (Nicholas Cabasilas). He invites all people—and each person individually—to salvation, so that the response of each may always be “grounded in the common faith” and “at the same time be unique.”

We recall the words of St. Paul that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2.20). In this case, the words “in me,” “me,” and “for me” do not contradict the words “in us,” “us,” and “for us” with reference to our “common salvation.” Ever grateful for the heavenly gifts of his regeneration in Christ, the Apostle of freedom “makes what is shared his own,” as if the pre-eternal Word of God became incarnate, was crucified, and was resurrected “for him personally.”

Our experience of faith is “unique” and “profoundly personal” as a freedom given to us by Christ, as something that is at the same time “essentially ecclesiastical,”

an experience “of common freedom.” This most genuine freedom in Christ is expressed as love and applied support to our concrete neighbor, as this is described in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.30–37) and in the passage about the Last Judgment (Mt. 25.31–46), but also as respect and concern for the world and the eucharistic approach to creation. Freedom in Christ has a personal and holistic nature, which is especially revealed during Holy and Great Lent in its understanding of asceticism and fasting. Christian freedom, as existential authenticity and fullness, does not involve a gloomy asceticism, a life without grace and joy, “as if Christ never came.” Moreover, fasting is not only “abstinence from food,” but “renunciation of sin,” a struggle against egotism, a loving departure from the self to the brother in need, “a heart that burns for the sake of all creation.” The holistic nature of spirituality in sustained by the experience of Great Lent as a journey toward Pascha and as a foretaste of “the glorious freedom of God’s children” (Rom. 8.21).

We pray that our Savior Jesus Christ may render all of us worthy of walking the way of Holy and Great Lent with ascesis, repentance, forgiveness, prayer, and godly freedom. And we conclude with the words of our spiritual father, the late Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon, during the Divine Liturgy of Cheesefare Sunday in 1970 at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Athens: “As we enter Holy Lent, what awaits us at the end is vision, miracle, and the experience of the Resurrection, the foremost experience of the Orthodox Church. Let us proceed toward this vision and experience but not without having received and offered forgiveness, not with a fast purely from meat and oil, not with a sense of hypocrisy, but with divine freedom, in spirit and truth, in the spirit of truth, in the truth of the spirit.”

Holy and Great Lent 2025

✠ BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople

Fervent supplicant for all before God

photo: Nikos Papachristou