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Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain issues his Encyclical for the beginning of the Holy & Great Lent 2020



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Encyclical for the beginning of the Holy & Great Lent 2020

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Beloved in the Lord:

Each year, in the cycle of time and seasons, Holy and Great Lent leads us

to the great and salvific Feast of Pascha. It is during this time that the Church invites all of her children to seriously reflect on many aspects of their lives, and most especially, about one's own relationship with Christ and neighbor.

On the Sunday before the beginning of Holy and Great Lent, also known as Cheesefare Sunday, the chanters sing the following: "The stadium of the virtues has opened; let all those who wish to compete enter." It is an open invitation to the people of God to enter into a spiritual stadium, that is, Great Lent, in order to participate in an ascetic struggle against the sins of pride, anger, hatred and so many more. Through fasting, elevated vigilance and contrite prayer, we are clothed with the spiritual armor needed to face the evil habits and weaknesses that many times overtake us, and simultaneously, we are strengthened by the visitation of God's Divine Grace and are filled with a certainty and joy that only come from Him.

Generally, Great Lent is understood as a time when we recall Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's commandment which ordered them to fast and not partake of the forbidden fruit. Due to their disobedience, they fell from grace and were removed from the Garden. As a result of their original failure, all of creation was corrupted, although it was created to be inherently good, and all of their human descendants until today, have a disposition towards sin. It is through holy baptism that we are all born anew and given the faculties by the Holy Spirit to combat and overcome sin. Therefore, as Orthodox Christians, we are also called to repent and keep a new fast, so we, too, can once again gain Paradise. We do so, as one of the hymns directs us – by wearing the armor of abstinence – abstinence from sin and evil.

Too often in our lives, when we think of the Lenten period our thoughts are immediately taken to food and dietary restrictions. Fasting, is not the goal in and of itself, but assists us in attaining virtue and holiness. In other words, fasting leads us to an end, that is, the purging of sin and vices from our souls, and communion with God. Fasting without spiritual struggle is useless. In order to stress this principle, the sacred forty-day period is introduced with words taken from the writings concerning fasting of Saint Basil the Great. The hymn, based on the words of the Cappadocian Father, says – "The fast has arrived, the mother of prudence, the accuser of sin, and the advocate of repentance, the state

of the angels, and the salvation of people" (Idiomelon from Clean Monday).

The ascetics and teachers usually only spoke of food in two ways. They wrote about the food that has become an idol for us, just as they wrote about foods that may cause us to sin. While they saw that food could become a temptation and cause us to lose sight of the path of righteousness, they also understood that food was and is a necessary part of our lives. They even remind us not to fast so strictly that we cannot do the good works of God. They speak to our hearts and instruct us that food does not save us. Only Jesus Christ saves the human being and He alone can restore the fallen icon of God.

It is appropriate to acknowledge that the hymnographers and many Fathers of the Church teach us that, the fast is a time of celebration and liberation. Their words reflect the instruction of the Savior, who says – "when you fast, do not be somber." Rather, He teaches us and instructs us, saying – "wash your face, anoint your head" (Matthew 6:17). Christ tells us to be joyful and glad in all we do, including when we fast. Great Lent is also known as a period of "joyful-sorrow" where we increase our ascetic practices and repent for our wrongdoings to God and neighbor, while simultaneously retaining in our hearts an explosive anticipation of forgiveness, healing, and life in the Light of Pascha.

The time has come that we perceive the Lenten period correctly. It is a period of metanoia, that is, repentance, a turning away from sin, fueled by our hope of eternal life. It is a period of deep self-reflection concerning our words and actions. It is a period of correction, spiritual growth, and transformation in Christ, personally and communally. Let us not overlook the ultimate goal by foolishly wasting our time evaluating ingredients. In our lived experience, we know quite well what is considered as a fasting food and appropriate for consumption in the "stadium of the virtues."

Indeed, fasting is an aid given to us for Great Lent. It is a practice that leads us to ponder upon the more important issues of Christian life. Fasting should propel us to do good works and fuel our love for God and neighbor. Certainly, we need to fast, so we can feed the poor and needy. Surely, we need to fast, so that we can guard our tongue from evil words and idle talk. Most definitely, we need to fast, so that we can pray with a

“pure and humbled heart.” We need to fast, so that it can lead us to the direction of repentance. We need to fast, so that we can gain the strength needed to ask for forgiveness from those we have wronged. As a wise desert Father once said, “Our life and our death are with our neighbor. If we do good to our neighbor, we do good to God; if we cause our neighbor to stumble, we sin against Christ” (St. Anthony the Great).

Let us replace our cruelty, hatred, meanness and anger with compassion, love, charity and love. The time has come to change our way of thinking and make it more Christ-centered. Let us not foolishly spend this season legalistically ticking boxes on the long list of spiritual chores and mechanical expressions of “piety”, but rather stride for and live with a deep desire for conversion and transfiguration in Christ. Let us take advantage of this most holy period of our ecclesiastical calendar, so that by fasting from foods, we may be strengthened in our struggle against sin, and we may become true participants in the glory, light, and Life granted to us on Pascha.

As we look to the approaching days of Lent, we might reflect on the words of St. Romanos, the great author of the Kontakia, who wrote the following concerning the Prodigal Son:

O Son and Word of God, Creator of all things,
we your unworthy servants ask and implore you:
have mercy on all who call upon you.
As you did the prodigal, spare those who have sinned.
Accept and save through compassion
those who in repentance run to you, O King, crying “We have sinned.”
Give us tears, as you did the harlot,
and pardon for the sins we have committed.
And, as you did the publican, take pity on us all,
at the intercessions of the Mother of God.
Make us partakers of your supper, as you did the prodigal,
Master and Lord of the ages.

With paternal love and in hope of the glorious Resurrection,

Holy and Great Lent 2020

+Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain