

Encyclical for the beginning of the Holy & Great Lent 2021 by His Eminence Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain



MESSAGE OF HIS EMINENCE ARCHBISHOP NIKITAS OF THYATEIRA AND GREAT BRITAIN FOR THE BEGINNING OF THE HOLY AND GREAT LENT

My son, deprive not the poor of his living,
and do not keep needy eyes waiting.
Do not grieve the one who is hungry,
nor anger a man in want.
Do not add to the troubles of an angry mind,
nor delay your gift to a beggar.
Do not reject an afflicted suppliant,
nor turn your face away from the poor.
Do not avert your eye from the needy,
nor give a man occasion to curse you;
for if in bitterness of soul he calls down a curse upon you,

his Creator will hear his prayer.
Make yourself beloved to the congregation;
bow your head low to a great man.
Incline your ear to the poor,
and answer him peaceably and gently.
Deliver him who is wronged from the hand of the wrongdoer;
and do not be fainthearted in judging a case. (Ecclesiasticus 4:1-9)

As we enter the season of Holy and Great Lent, the above words from the reflections of Jesus son of Sirach, present us with a brief code of conduct, a measure of contemplation for our own lives, during this sacred period of increased self-examination. We can find many similar admonitions and exhortations throughout the long course of our Church's tradition. It is our work and responsibility to not only read and admire these words and concepts, but also through the common sacramental life of the Church and our personal ascetic efforts, to enter into and experience for ourselves the spirit of our Holy Tradition.

The drought of sin leaves us as a parched and thirsty land. Lent is a time in which we are called to journey through the gates of repentance and to draw from the refreshing waters of the wellspring of Truth. Progress along the road to these life-giving waters, my fellow sojourners, is often understood as a series of negations, in other words a catalogue of things to avoid, itemized into rules, guidelines, and restrictions. We should not, however, surrender to the false security of this one-sided reading of repentance. It is true that the list quoted above begins with certain prohibitions; but, just as Christ fulfilled the warnings of the Ten Commandments with the promises of the Beatitudes, our Holy Tradition gently reminds us, time and time again, that what we *do* is more significant than what we *do not do*. Perhaps, our inability to grasp the true meaning and purpose of Great Lent has left us with some misconceptions and misunderstandings. The time has come for us to search and find the full meaning of this period of preparation, to more carefully study the signposts left for us along the way by the great men and women of our Church over the centuries.

There was a time when the members of the Body of Christ did not have access to extensive libraries filled with treasured texts that explain and define aspects of Christian life for us. Rather, they had the sacred Mysteries of the Church together with words of Scripture to guide them into understanding and knowledge of God. Within the verses of the Bible, they found that while there are many commandments concerning what not to do, it is very apparent that the Christian way of life is a pattern of positive and active directives. The essence of this life is to

be found in the life of Christ Himself and how He responded to those around Him, how the Son of Man conducted Himself as He walked and lived among us. Christ forgave, embraced, taught, healed, fed, and did many other things, “were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). This Lent is an opportunity for us to reflect on the practice of these virtues, instead of focusing on dietary restrictions and other measures. So often we worry about the use of olive oil, as opposed to vegetable oil (*elaion*), and we forget the words of the Lord, quoting the Prophet Hosea, “I desire mercy” (*eleos*). We forget that food in itself will not save us. It is for this reason that the Prophet Moses wrote to the children of Israel that God “humbled you and let you know hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 8:3). Our hope and trust are not in food or in the ways of men; rather, our nourishment is the word of God and our trust is in Him. We also find the following admonition in the Book of Proverbs, “So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man, Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight” (Proverbs 3:4-5).

So it is, beloved children of God, that we look to the good, correct, proper, and right things, to present before His Throne. We find a beautiful reference in the Book of Tobit that puts our efforts into perspective, “Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than much with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold. For almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin. Those who perform deeds of charity and of righteousness will have fullness of life; but those who commit sin are the enemies of their own lives” (Tobit 12:8-10). Christian virtues do not exist independently and separately, with one virtue in isolation from the other. Rather, they are like a length of multi-colored fabric that is woven to form a beautiful pattern and expression. In the same manner, Saint John of the Ladder describes how the true virtues complement one another. He writes, “A holy team is love and humility; the one exalts, and the other, supporting the exalted one, never fails” (*The Ladder*, 25:37). These virtues, working in perfect unison and harmony, not only in one individual life, but in the common life of the Church Body, are the promised treasures of the Kingdom of God.

A spiritual trumpet sounds these days, beloved faithful, and invites us to the joy of the fast. The summons is an invitation to enter the period of Lent with a jubilant spirit and a peaceful heart, not a gloomy and sad face. The Lord Himself reminds us

of this, “And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men ... But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men, but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:16-18). These words remind us that the ascetic struggle of each person is private and personal. It is not an accomplishment nor a feat to be on display for others, but something to be experienced free from boasting and devoid of pride. The great Prophet Isaiah puts us in the right frame of mind with a series of rhetorical questions:

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.

Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?

Is it to bow down his head like a rush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?

Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is this not the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; and when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:3-7)

The great Fathers and Mothers of the Church clearly understood that Christ used parables to vividly illustrate the practice of different virtues. For this reason, the Church prepares us for the journey of Lent and the walk to Pascha by offering specific readings that will guide us on the true and virtuous path. Unless we begin by embracing authentic humility, as seen in the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, and unless we acknowledge and repent from our sins, as witnessed in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and unless we respond to the needs, pain, and sorrow of others, as taught in the Parable of the Last Judgement, we shall not have understood the heart of Great Lent and the Gospel itself. All of these virtues must be embraced and lived as an expression of love, for “love is the banishment of every kind of contrary thought, for love thinks no evil” (*The Ladder*, 30:8). In

Western traditions of Christianity, the Lenten spirit might be expressed in the idea of depriving oneself of a personal comfort or “giving up something for Lent”. Christ only asks that we give up sin and dress ourselves in the cloak of righteousness and love. As the author of *The Ladder* tells us, “After God, let us have our conscience as our mentor and rule in all things, so that we may know which way the wind is blowing and set our sails accordingly” (26:6).

As we journey across the tumultuous seas of life, let us enter the blessed and safe harbor of Great and Holy Lent. Together, sisters and brothers, we set our steps to walk the true path of Christ’s salvific Crucifixion and Resurrection, encouraging one another with Saint John of the Ladder’s final exhortation “Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house upon high ... Let us hasten until we attain to the unity of faith and the knowledge of God”.

May His mercy, peace and love be with you all.

Holy and Great Lent, 2021

With paternal love and blessings,

+ Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain

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