04/03/2022

Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain – Encyclical for the Beginning of the Holy & Great Lent 2022



In just a few days, we will begin the Lenten journey to Pascha. The Church once again, invites us to walk the sacred path of liturgical and personal preparation, as She has done for centuries. She sounds the trumpet of the Lord and summons all the faithful to put on the armour of salvation, so as to reach our destination victorious over the passions. The journey is not an easy one, especially as the ways and temptations of the world present themselves to us, trying to pull us away from our path and into sin. Yet, the Church does not neglect to provide us with an array of tools and weapons to cleanse and fortify ourselves at every opportunity, and, when need arises, the means to gently wipe our eyes dampened by tears of repentance and to soothe our troubled brow.

If one were to sit and read the hymnology of the Church, he or she would notice that the desert ascetics of old and the spiritual hoplites that lived in our own day and time universally embraced three important disciplines that allowed them to be delivered from the sin, evil, and temptations of this life. The good fight comprises of fasting, vigilance and prayer; these are the weapons and shield that protect the

Christian people from the darts of the evil one. Please allow me to offer a few thoughts about each of these virtues, so that you can be strengthened in your Lenten journey and in life.

Fasting — When we, as Orthodox Christians, speak about fasting and the fast, our mind usually goes to dietary restrictions and abstaining from things. In reality, though, the word ‘fast’ means to not eat at all. But, Christ Himself and the Fathers of the Church never understood the fast in this limited and restrictive manner. The Church, which preserves and correctly teaches what is true, reminds us that the fast encompasses our whole life and, therefore, includes uprooting sin from every aspect of our lives, in addition to voluntarily abstaining from certain foods and activities of life. The great hymnographers of the Church teach us by recounting how Moses cleansed his eyes through fasting and was able to look upon and converse with God. True fasting is likened to the role of a sword in our spiritual panoply, but this is a blade that can also be used on ourselves as a surgical scalpel, delicately cutting away every evil from our heart. The hymnographers remind us that the suitable time for repentance is at hand, and that through the virtue and discipline of fasting we achieve victory over the demons. In the hymns, we read that fasting is the mother of prudence, the accuser of sin, the companion of repentance, the polity of the angels, and the salvation of people. It is for this reason that the ecclesiastical authors tell us to keep the fast that is pleasing to the Lord: reigning in the tongue, distancing ourselves from anger, separating ourselves from earthly desires, and so much more. Charity and almsgiving are also often mentioned hand-in-hand with fasting. We are told that these are the elements of a true and acceptable fast in the eyes of the Lord. It is interesting to note the inclusion of these other deeper aspects of fasting in the above descriptions and the lack of a focus on food.

Vigilance — In the Old Testament book Song of Songs, the author writes “though I sleep, my heart is vigilant” (and awake). In order for one to fight against sin and to converse with God through prayer, one must be vigilant, attentive, awake, and careful not to be led astray by distractions and far from one’s real purpose and mission. Vigilance is being spiritually prepared to receive the Bridegroom, who comes in the middle of the night. Thus, we fulfil the words of Scripture, which tell us “Keep your heart with all vigilance … let your eyes look directly forward and let your gaze be straight before you”. When one abstains from the heavy, fatty, sumptuous foods that so often fill our plates, we feel lighter, and more peaceful. He who is vigilant and awake does not fall into the slumber of sin. We are more attentive and pay closer attention to what we do and say. We cultivate in our hearts the virtue of vigilance, silently waiting for the unwaning light that comes

forth from the empty tomb. In his First Epistle, St. Peter reminds us to be sober and watchful. Let us, then, be watchful and vigilant so that we may cross the turbulent seas of life and safely reach the harbour of the Resurrection.

Prayer — The scriptural readings that lead us into Lent tell us how we should pray. The directives are simple and clear. We must not be like the hypocrites; rather, we should go into a private space and avoid heaping up empty phrases. Our prayer should be sincere, simple, and filled with words of compunction and truth. St. John of the Ladder reminds of these important matters when he writes his divinely-inspired work. He tells us that the short, honest, appealing words of the thief on the cross gave him entrance into paradise. We need to change the direction of our thoughts and, perhaps, how we pray. Too often we worry about the quantity and not the quality involved in prayer. Having understood the spirit in which we should pray, it is then up to us to cultivate and discover our own relationship to prayer, to work in order to really make prayer our own, personal expression before God. Then, we will learn the comforting power of prayer and what is meant when the hymns refer to prayer as our breastplate. Lent affords us this opportunity.

If we cleanse our bodies and minds through fasting, if we become more alert to our sins and sensitive to the love of God, and if we reach out to Him in prayer, then we will live the Lenten period as is meant.

May God grant us the courage, strength, discernment, and above all the love, to faithfully embark on this sacred journey so that we may arrive together at the beauty, glory and light of the Resurrection of Christ at Pascha.

With paternal love and blessings,

Holy and Great Lent, 2022

+ Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain

thyateira.org.uk