

On Forgiveness Sunday and the Spirit of the Great Fast

This Sunday is a very important Sunday for all faithful Orthodox Christians, coming as it does before the beginning of Great Lent, and as part of the Church's Triodion journey to help us achieve Theosis.

Reviewing our progress, the first Sunday of Triodion taught us how to pray: with the humility of the Publican, recognizing our sinfulness and asking for the mercy of God. The second Sunday we are reminded that we have a patient and loving Father who always waits for His Prodigal Sons and Daughters to return to Him, no matter how we who separate ourselves through the Passions and our sins. The third Sunday demonstrates just how we can build a closer relationship with our Creator, which depends on the loving and Godly-oriented ways in which we treat our neighbors: our grandparents, parents, siblings, children, classmates and coworkers—and especially the least among us.

This Sunday, "Forgiveness Sunday", we are meant to prepare ourselves for our entrance into Great Lent. The Church teaches us to exercise three very important actions during this time: prayer, fasting, and the vigil. St Basil the Great himself tells us, "When you are fasting, don't think only of the food you are giving up, for that is not the only way to fast. True fasting is not only giving up food, but also becoming a stranger to the Passions and our iniquities. Think of your brother and do not be unjust. Forgive your neighbor for the wrong he has done. If he owes you and has not repaid you, forgive him. Otherwise, although you are not eating meat, you are eating your own brother; and although you fast until evening, you spend your days in the courts judging others."

This is why, in many Orthodox countries, they still hold what are called "Forgiveness Vespers" on the day before this coming "Clean Monday". These Vespers end with everyone—from the local leaders, to the priests, or Bishop—asking the rest of the congregation for forgiveness. This is something that is observed in the monasteries as well, so that having sought forgiveness, and having forgiven our brethren, we may enter Great Lent with a purified spirit.

Today, I would like to spend some time considering an important part of the preparation to meet that Great Feast of Pascha, and that is fasting. The Fast is something that we see, not just in the early days of the Church, but even more ancient. After the Creation, God requested that Adam and Eve not to taste of the fruit of the Tree. Spiritually, this request to restrain our passions to the will of God, teaches us the pleasing virtue of obedience. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, our Lord did not cast them out; rather they felt shame, and then left Paradise.

The concept of fasting extends even further across the Old Testament, not just with individuals, but even nations, who used fasting as a sign of repentance and a way to restore their relationship with God. Later in the New Testament, St. John the Forerunner and Baptist practiced fasting, before, and as a part of his baptismal ministry. After Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, our Lord went into the desert and fasted 40 days, praying to the Father for strength and guidance, before He began His salvific mission. Of course, that while He fasted on the last day, the Devil tempted Him. Among the temptations, the Evil One tried to use our Lord's hunger to persuade Him to change stones into bread. Jesus dismissed him by quoting the wise scripture, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)

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Later still, those who loved Jesus Christ gave up their homes and possessions to seek communion with God through monasticism. These people included not just the uneducated, like St. Anthony, but even those who were educated in the world, such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. Basil the Great. After his studies, before he began his public service to the Church, St. Basil went into the desert to fast, pray, and planning his future.

Indeed, fasting is an important part of self-discovery for all human beings, especially spiritual persons, who wish to fully enjoy life. Enjoying life does not simply mean possessing whatever we want, or eating whatever we wish. We only need look again at the parables of the New Testament to see the Rich Man who thought less of how to serve God and his neighbor with his surplus crops, and was instead self-satisfied, thinking of how he could enjoy the rest of his life in ease. During the night, the angel required his soul, and the Rich Man's materialistic dreams were in vain. There is of course the other Rich Man who ate and drank plentifully, without giving a thought to poor Lazarus at his gate. The Rich Man missed his opportunity to be with his Creator, while Lazarus was welcomed into the bosom of Abraham. This happened, not because of the Rich Man's wealth, but because he had no love for his neighbor.

This time of the year we are of course called upon to cast away these examples, and help our neighbors, and the needy. These needs are not simply limited to hunger, though; they also include the sicknesses that have regrettably become a part of modern life, one of which is loneliness. Human beings have a need to interact with one another, to visit one another, to open their hearts to those who are alone, or feel lonely. The opportunities to connect with one another as icons of Christ, and to discover ourselves, are plentiful.

As we fast and give of ourselves, we are participating in that saying of our philosophical forefathers, γνῶθι σεαυτόν, that is "Know thyself." If we don't examine our being and know ourselves as we fast, then we are in a kind of limbo. We are not in a position to dream, or create, and we are certainly not at peace.

These are the things I wish to share with you my brothers and sisters in Christ. If we imitate our Lord and other righteous Saints through fasting, then that virtue known as obedience will come, and we shall be in the proper loving spirit to welcome that great Feast our Church gives to us: Pascha.

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Metropolitan of Atlanta