

Epistle
of the Permanent Conference of Ukrainian Orthodox Bishops
Beyond the Borders of Ukraine
on the occasion of the Nativity Fast



To the God-loving pastors, venerable monastics and all the faithful children of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the Diaspora and in Ukraine,

“Fasting heals illnesses, drives away the devil, removes evil thoughts, clears the mind, purifies the body, and raises up a person to the Throne of God.”

-St. Athanasius the Great

Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers! Dear Brothers and Sisters!

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Every year with great joy, the Orthodox Church prepares the faithful for the great feast of the Nativity of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ. St. John Chrysostom, the Holy Hierarch of Christ’s Church, says, “The day of the Nativity of Christ is the most important of all the feasts, because it is the mother of all feasts. Without the Nativity, there would be no Resurrection.”

A forty-day fast, called *Pylypivka*, or St. Philip’s Fast, precedes the Nativity of Christ, according to the Typikon of the Church. As such, the Church Typikon regards the Nativity of Christ as a second Pascha. Just as the faithful prepare themselves for Pascha by prayer and fasting, so too the Nativity Fast is for Christians a time of preparation for the coming of our Saviour into the world. St. Symeon of Thessalonica writes, “This 40-day fast is similar to the fast of Moses, who fasted 40 days and nights and received the tablets with God’s Commandments. We fast 40 days and receive the living Word of God, incarnated from the Virgin, and we commune of His Body.”

The Holy Nativity Fast in our Orthodox Church begins on November 28, on the day following the feast day of the Holy Apostle Philip. Thus, it takes the name *Pylypivka* in Ukrainian, or Philip's Fast. Venerable Anastasias of Sinai in his writings says that the Nativity Fast is of apostolic origin, and relates the following tradition about the Holy Apostle Philip: "The Holy Apostle Philip, before his martyr death, asked God to punish his tormentors. Because of this it was revealed to him that, as punishment for this request, he himself would not be able to enter paradise until forty days had passed following his death. And so St. Philip entreated the other apostles to fast on his behalf for forty days, and the apostles instructed all the faithful to fast for forty days."

The Nativity Fast for Orthodox Christians and for all the faithful of the Church of Christ is a symbol of the prayer and fasts of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets who awaited the coming of the Christ Messiah with great longing. At its foundation, the Nativity Fast has deep spiritual meaning, because it prepares Christians for the appearance of God on earth. In general, fasting was known to humanity as means of spiritual perfection since the time of the first people on earth. The prohibition of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the earthly paradise of Eden was spiritual foreshadowing of our Christian fast where a person may attain their own spiritual perfection through the taming of the flesh.

The Fast is a promise of spiritual growth for a Christian. It can be confidently stated that humanity has always received benefit from fasting. From the most ancient of times, there was an awareness that a genuine fast brings a person great physical and spiritual benefits. According to the teaching of the Church, bodily fasting ought to be accompanied unequivocally by spiritual fasting. Let us remember that the time of the Nativity Fast, which we are now entering, is one of spiritual warfare for each one of us, in which both the soul and the body participate. The soul takes part through fervent prayer, sincere repentance, and the righteous fulfilment of the Christian virtues. There can be no spiritual fast without the mortification of the flesh. St. Basil the Great writes, "To the extent that you deprive the flesh is how much you add lustre and spiritual health to your soul. For it is not by increasing the physical strength in our bodies, but through the endurance of the soul and patience in difficult circumstances that we gain strength against the unseen enemies." As well, a true fast strengthens our health, constrains the flesh, cleanses our soul, and leads us to God. Fasting gives us spiritual wings by which Christians are victorious over satan's wiles and we spiritually rise up to the heavens. The Lord speaks to us through fasting. He teaches us humility and holiness.

May our Love for our Lord Jesus Christ become an inspiration so that this year we might suitably observe this Nativity Fast and prepare our souls and hearts to worthily greet the feast of the Nativity of Christ.

With Archpastoral Blessing,

† **YURIJ**, Metropolitan,
Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada

† **ANTONY**, Metropolitan,
Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA
Locum Tenens of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the Diaspora

† **IOAN** Archbishop,
Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the Diaspora

† **JEREMIAH**, Archbishop,
Ukrainian Orthodox Eparchy of Brazil and South America

† **ILARION**, Bishop,
Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada

† **ANDRIY**, Bishop,
Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada

† **DANIEL**, Bishop,
Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA