

Catechetical Homily for Holy and Great Lent (2015)

Prot. No. 133

CATECHETICAL HOMILY At the Opening of Holy and Great Lent †BARTHOLOMEW

By God's grace Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome
and Ecumenical Patriarch
To the Plenitude of the Church
May the Grace and Peace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ be with you
Together with our Prayer, Blessing and Forgiveness

*"The arena of virtues has opened; let those who wish to compete enter."
(Triodion Sticheron, Cheesefare Sunday)*

Beloved brothers and sisters, dear children in the Lord,

Our Lord Jesus Christ grafts us into His body, inviting us to become saints, "just as He is holy." (1 Pt 1:16) Our Creator wants us to be in communion with Him in order to taste His grace, which is to participate in His sanctity. Communion with God is a life of repentance and holiness; whereas estrangement from God, or sin, is identified by the Church Fathers with "evil of the heart." Sin is not natural, but derives from evil choice" (Theodoret of Cyrus, Dialogue 1, Immutabilis, PG 83.40D) or from the evil spirit, since "no one sins, who promises faith," according to Ignatius of Antioch, the "God-bearer."

Holiness is a quality that belongs to the Lord as "the one, who offers and is offered, who receives and is distributed." The celebrant of the Sacrament of the Divine Eucharist, by divine grace offers to the faithful "the holy things for the holy people," the body and blood of Christ; and he immediately receives from the Orthodox faithful the response to this offering: "One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father, "who is eaten but never consumed; who sanctifies those who participate."

In our struggle to achieve "likeness" to God, for which we were created, namely holiness, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Orthodox Church, which aspires exclusively and solely to our salvation, "rightfully proclaimed" one season as a period of special prayer and supplication in order to calm the passions of our soul and body.

This season commences tomorrow as a salvific preparation for the "great and most sacred Pascha of Christ." We are referring to Holy and Great Lent, which we must live "by offering prayer and seeking forgiveness," in order truly to taste Pascha "with all the saints," by becoming "saints," by confessing before God and people that we are "clay vessels" that are shattered on a daily basis by the evil one, always "falling and rising." That is to say, we must admit our human imperfection and failure, as well as our insignificance before God, by repenting and repeating day-in and day-out, at all times and in all places – even as we are made "holy" through baptism – that "one is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father."

Therefore, we call upon all Orthodox Christian faithful – clergy, monks and nuns, as well as all our brothers, sisters and children in the Lord – to transform our life at all times, but particularly during this period of Holy and Great Lent, into a loving effort of preparation before our neighbour so that we might share more vividly from now in the Lord’s Kingdom, the “new Pascha,” whose light never sets. We invite everyone to a life of holiness and spiritual struggle so that the possibility of transcending sin may be granted to the whole world and to us as a “good gift” and “perfect gift.” For “everyone that is born from God does not sin... and cannot sin, for that person is born of God.” (1 Jn 3:9-10)

Let us enter, then, with all our soul, without sorrowful faces but instead rejoicing and delighting, into this spiritual arena of virtues; and let us arm ourselves “with the brightness of love, the splendor of prayer, the purity of chastity, and the strength of valor” in order to journey with the Lord, even as we pray that “He may not overlook us when we are in danger of alienating ourselves from Him.” (*Hymn from the Sunday of the Veneration of the Holy Cross*) Rather, may He render us worthy “to reach His holy resurrection on the third day, which shines incorruption through the world.” (Poem by Theodore, Service on Monday of the 1st Week of Lent)

Beloved brothers and sisters, children in the Lord,

Holy and Great Lent is a period of preparation and repentance as the voice of our conscience, which is internal and inexpressible, our personal judgment. When it finds us doing wrong, it protests vehemently inasmuch as “nothing in the world is more violent than our conscience,” according to the experienced herald of repentance, St. Andrew of Crete. Thus, each of us must be at peace with our conscience in order that “we may offer a mystical sacrifice in the fire of our conscience,” surrendering our passions and offering them as an oblation of love toward our fellow human beings, just as the Lord gave Himself up “for the life and salvation of the world.” Only then will forgiveness rise from the tomb for us as well; and only then shall we live in mutual respect and love, far from the horrific crimes that we witness plaguing the entire world today. In this struggle, we have as our allies and intercessors all the saints and especially our all-holy Mother of God, who through her prayers “washes our conscience.”

Therefore, we urge and beseech you, as the spiritual father of all our Orthodox faithful throughout the world, to run with eagerness the race that opens up before us tomorrow in the arena of virtues, “neither thinking nor practicing sinful things.” Let us rather walk with God’s grace in order to cleanse our conscience “with the good option” of repentance in the conviction that heaven and earth, as well as all “things visible and invisible” will ultimately emanate the light of our Lord’s resurrection.

If we stand and behave righteously “before the doors of the Lord’s temple,” then we shall be vested with the bright robe of Christ’s imitation and be rendered worthy of the “new drink” that comes from the source of incorruption. Then, we shall taste the joy of the radiant tomb of the Lord and be swept inside the Church “to the very depths of the altar,” where “the awesome mysteries are celebrated.” May it be so.

*Your fervent supplicant before God,
†Bartholomew of Constantinople
Holy and Great Lent 2015*