

2014 Catechetical Homily For Holy and Great Lent

† B A R T H O L O M E W

By God's Mercy Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome
and Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Plenitude of the Church:
Grace and Peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ
And Prayers, Blessings and Forgiveness from us

*“Behold, now is the favorable time,
now is the time of salvation.” (2 Cor. 6.2)*

Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord,

Our Orthodox Church recommends that, during this period of Great Lent, we focus our attention toward sincere repentance, “the melting pot of sin,” according to St. John Chrysostom. Repentance is the first topic of our Lord Jesus Christ’s preaching and the very essence of the Christian teaching. It is the Church’s daily invitation to us all.

Despite this, many of us have not truly experienced repentance. We sometimes feel that it does not concern us personally because we have not “come to ourselves” in order to comprehend and contemplate how we may have committed any sin. However, as we are taught by the wise teacher of the spiritual life, Abba Isaac the Syrian, and as most of the Church Fathers proclaim through experience, “repentance is necessary even for the perfect.” This is because repentance does not merely signify remorse for our sins and the consequent decision no longer to repeat them, but it also implies a change of our attitudes toward what is better so that we acquire constant improvement before God and the world, as well as continuous increase in love and humility, purification and peace.

In this sense, repentance is an unending journey toward divine perfection, to which we must at all times aim and move. Indeed, since God’s perfection is boundless, our way toward its likeness must also be boundless and endless. There is always a level of perfection beyond what we have achieved, and so we must constantly seek spiritual progress and transformation, as urged by St. Paul, who ascended to the third heaven and beheld the ineffable mysteries: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3.18)

The more our internal world is cleansed, the more our spiritual eye is purified, the more clearly we see ourselves and everything around us. Moreover, this change – namely, the improvement in our vision of the reality of this world and the spiritual condition of ourselves – is precisely what repentance is all about. Repentance is a renewed and improved state of spirit, of the condition where we presently find ourselves. Accordingly, then, repentance is the fundamental presupposition of spiritual progress and of acquiring likeness toward God.

In order, of course, for repentance to be genuine, it must also be accompanied by the appropriate fruits, especially forgiveness of and charity toward others. The basic criterion of sincere repentance is that our heart is moved toward acceptance of our fellow human beings and response to their needs as much as we can. After all, the way of repentance is recognition and confession of our sins, no longer holding grudges against others, praying with warmth and integrity, as well as mercifulness, humility, love toward all people, victory of good over evil, avoiding vainglory and arrogance, which immediately withers away everything.

This struggle within our soul is revealed in “the difference between the publican and the Pharisee,” which is an invitation to “despise the proud voice of the latter, while envying the contrite prayer of the former,” even as we fervently pray with tears “that God may take pity on us sinners and have mercy on us.”

The period of Great Lent that is upon us is an opportunity, in the midst of a widespread and global financial crisis, to demonstrate our material and spiritual assistance toward other people. When we act charitably and manifest our repentance in practice – moving from an individualistic and pharisaic way of life to a collective and altruistic way of life, like the publican – then we shall realize the great benefit of repentance and conversion, while also experiencing repentance as a vital transition from the sin of self-centeredness and vainglory to the virtue of love, “aspiring to the humility and attitude of the publican, who deserved God’s mercy.”

From the Patriarchal Throne of St. John Chrysostom, who both preached and practiced such repentance, as we enter this salvific period of purification of heart and soul in order to welcome the Passion, Cross, Burial and Resurrection of our Lord, not just in rituals and words but also in practice and experience, we too as his unworthy successor urge, entreat and beseech you: “Acquire repentance by becoming new people, by renouncing the old nature of sinfulness and acquiring newness of life.... For that is where the fullness of divine grace lies.”

Behold, then, beloved brothers and sisters, a favourable time “of mourning” opens up before us, an arena of vigilance and discipline, so that “before the theater of this life passes, we may care for our salvation” with sincere and tangible repentance for all “our sins, wrongdoings, and injustices.... without adhering to or doing what we have been commanded” by the Lord, so that Christ our God, “who is present everywhere and fills all things, may care for us” in His great and inscrutable mercy.

May His saving grace be with you all.

Holy and Great Lent 2014
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Fervent supplicant for all before God