

CATHECHETICAL HOMILY
ON THE OCCASION OF THE BEGINNING OF GREAT LENT

+ **BARTHOLOMEW**

By the Mercy of God

Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Plenitude of the Church

Grace and Peace be with you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

Together with our Prayer, Blessing and Forgiveness

Beloved brothers and sisters, children in the Lord,

The holy fathers, who arranged everything in an orderly manner, instituted a period of ascetic discipline and spiritual purification for forty days prior to the great feast of the Lord's resurrection. This ascetic rule assumes the form of a limitation on foods throughout fasting, but especially an abstinence from evil. The saintly hymnographer characteristically emphasizes that a genuine and favourable form of fasting for God is the estrangement from wrongdoing, control of the tongue, alienation from anger, separation from evil desires, including gossip, deceit and swearing, restoration of justice, disengagement from passionate thoughts, fervent confession, cleansing of the conscience, "which there can be nothing more difficult," refraining from "harmful passions, from envy and hatred, indeed from every wickedness," shunning of "the mind's perversion," admission of transgressions. For "the Judge is close, at the door," and he tries hearts and minds, since "He is everywhere present and fills all things." (Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete)

The aim of bodily *ascesis* is the purification of the mind and its concentration on the love of our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, as well as on the love of our fellow human beings, which constitutes the evidence that we are disciples of the One who loves them. This love must be tangible, resulting in some sacrifice for them on our part. For love without offering the necessary material and spiritual goods to those whom we love is but an *empty* word. This is particularly true in our age of great moral and financial crisis, when those of us who can are obliged to offer assistance to our fellow human beings with gladness, love and respect. Only then will our joy in the Lord's resurrection be complete, when our support for the least of His brothers, our own brothers and sisters, is complete. According to the honourable words of St. Basil the Great, "the man who loves his neighbor as himself possesses no more than his neighbor...thus, as much as your wealth increases, so much does your love decrease" (*Homily to the Rich*, PG 31.281B).

Unfortunately, the world believes that joy comes from *gaining* and *possessing* wealth, glory, positions and other pleasures. "There is nothing worse than a person who does not know how to love." And "when you see someone who needs physical or spiritual healing, do not say to yourself: I wonder why this person was not healed by anyone. Simply heal that person of his or her illness, and do not seek to lay blame on others. If you anoint that person with the word of your teaching, like the oil of healing, if you cure that person with your good nature, restoring the person's health with your patience, then that person will become the cause of the greatest

treasure for you.” (See St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 27 on 2 Corinthians* and *Homily 8 Against the Jews*, PG 61.586-587 and PG 48.932-933). The truth is that the joy and satisfaction from offering love and materials goods to our fellow human beings is incomparably greater. The conventional social understanding, which the young generation is taught as the most advantageous way of life, is greed and avarice. However, when such notions prevail, they create social turmoil and ultimately harm even those who acquire excessive wealth at the expense of others. The inevitable social division must be alleviated voluntarily by the offering of those who have to those who do not have, as our Lord explicitly teaches: “Let the person who has two garments give to another who has none” (Luke 3:11). It is only when we perceive our unity with all our fellow human beings, and especially the weak, will we journey through the period of Holy and Great Lent in a godly manner and receive the blessings of Christ.

During this year, which we have declared as “The Year of Global Solidarity,” particularly in light of the serious financial crisis in our world, we must all demonstrate greater concern for the consolation of our brothers and sisters who are deprived of the most elementary resources.

In this way, we shall enter “the arena of virtues that lies before us” in a devout manner and with spiritual progress, we will “enjoy the small coin,” “we will accept the just payment” and we will celebrate with fullness of joy the Holy Resurrection of our Lord, through which “life is truly oriented.” May His Grace and rich Mercy be with you all.

Holy and Great Lent 2013
Your fervent supplicant to God
+ Bartholomew
Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome,
and Ecumenical Patriarch

**To be read in churches on Cheesefare Sunday, March 17, following the Gospel.*