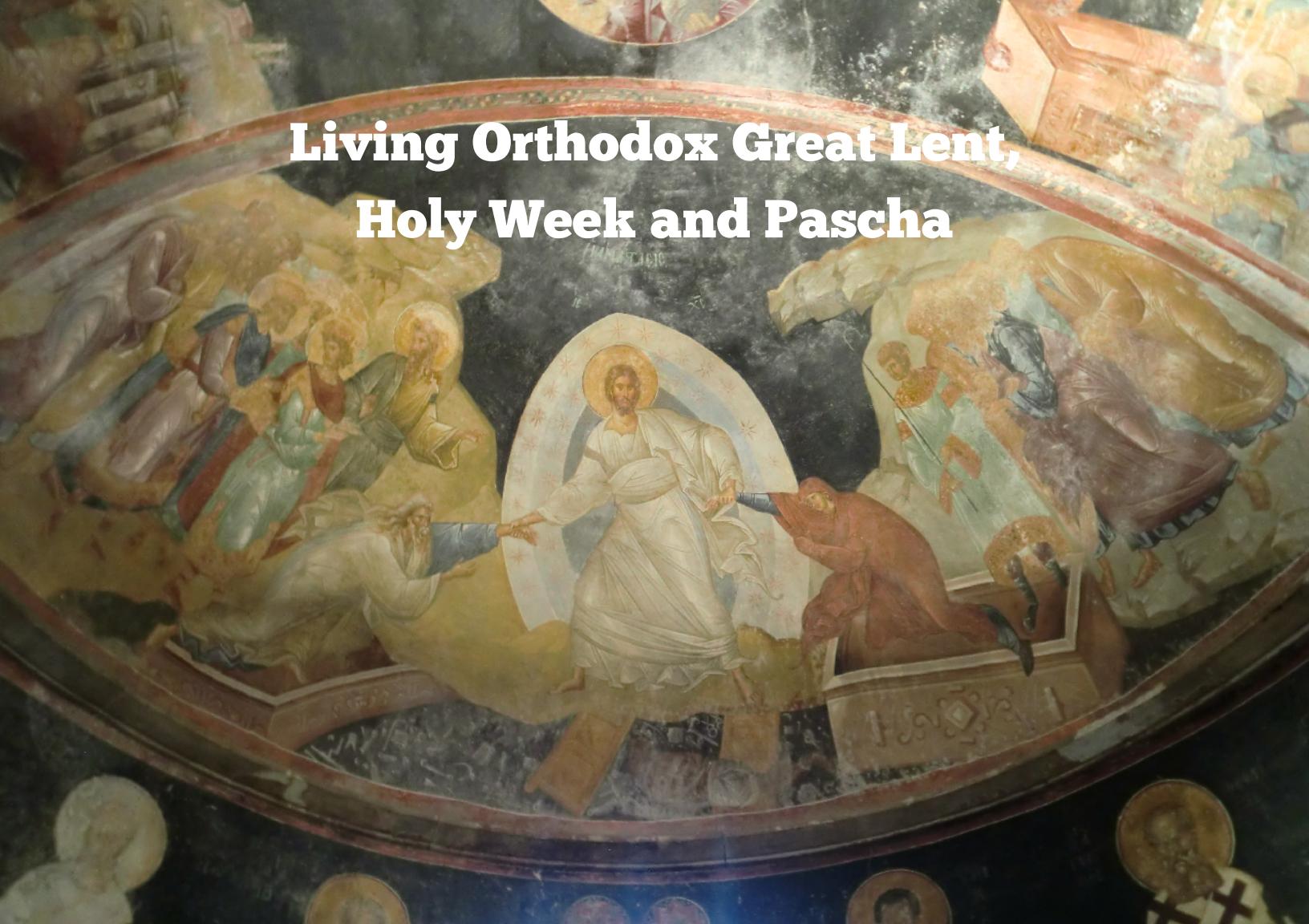


**Living Orthodox Great Lent,
Holy Week and Pascha**



Preface

For Orthodox Christians the Lenten period, that is, the journey to Pascha and the Resurrection of Christ, is liturgically rich and spiritually edifying. This most-holy period presents man with the opportunity to overcome his passions and be transformed from one state into another, spiritually higher and physically healthier one.

This short e-book contains the text, as published, of three articles I wrote for *HuffPost Religion* (the background photos are from a friend's visit to the Holy Mountain).

Living Orthodox Great and Holy Lent (02/25/2015)

Living the Orthodox Holy Week (04/14/2014)

Living the Orthodox Resurrection Service (05/01/2013)

I sincerely hope that this small compendium offering provides nourishment, guidance and strength to all who read it, highlighting the unparalleled life and tradition of the Orthodox faith.

Glory be to God for all things.

Evangelos Sotiropoulos

Clean Monday, 2016



Living Orthodox Great and Holy Lent

I have written on these electronic pages previously about *Living the Orthodox Resurrection Service* and *Living the Orthodox Holy Week*; now, to complete the trinity, albeit in reverse order, is my untrained take on living Lent.

It is difficult to truly experience the spiritual fruits of Holy Week, let alone the indescribable joy of Christ's life-giving resurrection, without actively partaking in Great Lent.

Think for a moment about how much time and effort is required to win a professional sporting championship; players and coaches do not show up only in time to hoist the trophy.

By the same token, we should avoid showing up only on Holy Saturday evening to receive the Paschal Light. Living Lent, in order to reap the Resurrection harvest, takes sacrifice.

For Orthodox Christians, Lent is an "arena of virtues" and one reason why Greek Orthodox wish each other *Kalo Agona* (translated accurately but poorly to "good

fight") on Clean Monday, the commencement of Lent.

The fight is concurrently corporate and private; the faithful join together often in distinctive divine services, such as the Pre-sanctified Divine Liturgy and the Salutations to the Theotokos, while simultaneously striving secretly in prayer, fasting, the study of scripture and almsgiving.

The Gospel of Matthew (6:14-21) read on Forgiveness Sunday is particularly instructive for our internal fight to repent (change) using the spiritual tools provided to us by the Church:

And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Living Orthodox Great and Holy Lent

Concerning fasting, we should bear in mind the following aphorism: There is more to Great Lent than fasting, and there is more to fasting than food.

Fasting -- or any other sacrifice we make during Lent -- is not an abstract concept or legalistic arrangement and should not be approached as such. Living Orthodox Great and Holy Lent should be a personal experience -- not a theoretical code or set of rules one needs to follow with absolute rigidity. What benefit, spiritual or otherwise, is to fast as prescribed by the Church, for example, but be easily irritable and/or miserable during the Lenten period.

The practice of sacrifice during Great Lent is not a one-size-fits-all approach; we should undertake what we can, emulating the poor widow in the Gospel who gave two copper coins out of her poverty and, trusting in the Lord who nourishes those who with genuine love and authentic humility strive to serve Him.

In order to ensure we are on the correct path, though, the need for, and guide of, a spiritual father is essential; otherwise, we may rationalize faulty behaviour and justify inaction.

Christ became incarnate to save mankind; He became man (*Theanthropos*) so we, who are made in his image and likeness, can become "God by grace" as the Church Fathers teach.

The arena of virtues, therefore, is a blessed opportunity for the faithful to inch closer, step by step, to the ultimate aim and destination in life: holiness and salvation in Christ -- the only Redeemer and Savior of the world.

We will make progress towards this purpose if we repent during Great and Holy Lent; if we change our behaviour; if we pay no heed to evil thoughts but instead nourish virtuous ones; if we become humble and forgiving; we will make progress towards eternal life if we love one another - including our enemies - and help our fellow man.

If we contest in the arena of virtues to acquire peace, patience, kindness and self-control (cf. Galatians 5:22-23), we will be transformed during Holy Week and experience the Resurrection as a life-altering event. If we contest in the arena of virtues, we will not revert back to our old self but begin our life anew, closer to Christ.

Living the Orthodox Holy Week

This week is Holy Week. This week offers us so many blessings. This week we are called to sacrifice in order to honour and commemorate (as we can never fully repay it) the ultimate sacrifice Christ made for mankind. This week is a chance for deep repentance (change). This week is an opportunity to look inward, to examine ourselves, to see who we are and where we are going. Let us seize this week. Let us seize everyday as a gift from God. Let us continually focus on the Lord this week, on His Saving Passion.

If someone was to offer us a cure for cancer, heart disease or any other illness, would we not run to them? Would we not want to seek them out and learn more? Well, Christ and the Church offer all who believe an indestructible remedy for something much greater: death. By His death, He has destroyed death.

Therefore, let us make haste to this week's many holy services; let us make haste to confession, repentance and humility; let us make haste so that when on Paschal Sunday (April 20th) the Priest chants, "Come,

receive the light from the unwaning light, and glorify Christ, Who has risen from the dead," we will truly feel its power in our hearts and in our souls. We will feel it and it will give us the courage and strength to face any obstacles. Let us strive to be transported from death to life and from earth to Heaven.

For the faithful, there is nothing greater than this: not work, not errands nor the daily running of routines. For the faithful, this is the week when we hear so many beautiful and powerful prayers (like those below) inspiring us to live a more virtuous life.

Living the Orthodox Holy Week

This is the week where the noise and distractions of the world should especially fall on deaf ears. Where we remember, above all, that "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Let us not allow our relationship with Christ and the Church to be a transactional one. Let us do what the Gospel directs us to. Let us practice the holy words of Saint John Climacus:

"Do all the good you can; do not speak evil of anyone; do not steal from anyone; do not lie to anyone; do not be arrogant towards anyone; do not hate anyone; do not be absent from the divine services; be compassionate to the needy; do not offend anyone; do not wreck another man's domestic happiness..."

Bridegroom (Nymphios) Service Prayers

Behold the Bridegroom comes in the midst of the night; and blessed is the servant, whom He shall find vigilant; and unworthy is he, whom he shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, that you will not be overcome by sleep, lest you be given up to death, and be shut out from the Kingdom. Wherefore, rouse yourself, crying out: "Holy, Holy, Holy are You, our God, through the protection of the Heavenly Hosts save us."

The Exaposteilarion

I see Your Bridal Chamber adorned, O my Saviour, and I have no wedding garment, that I may enter therein; O Giver of Light, make radiant the vesture of my soul, and save me.

KALI ANASTASI!

Living the Orthodox Resurrection Service

Orthodox Christians will draw together Saturday evening across the country and indeed around the world to celebrate Pascha, the victory of life over death and the Feast of Feasts.

As midnight approaches, the church lights are extinguished -- symbolizing the darkness of the tomb -- before the priest exits the altar with a burning white candle inviting parishioners to receive the light.

As the smoke from beeswax candles fills the air and the faithful attentively listen to the Gospel according to St. Mark, the sacred and timeless Paschal Hymn is enthusiastically proclaimed by all: Christ Is Risen from the dead, by death He has trampled down death, and on those in the tombs He has bestowed life.

This is one reason why it is Orthodox tradition to describe someone who has passed as having "fallen asleep" as opposed to "died" since by His death and Resurrection He has destroyed death.

In fact, the word cemetery is from the Greek meaning "sleeping place."

This most joyous and salvific truth is the indestructible foundation of the Orthodox Church -- the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Resurrection is so central that Christianity is little without it. The Apostle Paul writes in his First Letter to the Corinthians that, "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile."

The Resurrection service though is neither an abstract nor isolated event to be approached legalistically; rather, it is the culmination of spiritual preparation so that believers can be witnesses to the Resurrection and genuinely experience its meaning.

Just as bread needs time to bake in the oven, the Church Fathers have prescribed a time before Pascha (Great Lent) and the indispensable means to prepare for the Resurrection.

Living the Orthodox Resurrection Service

Three weeks before the beginning of Lent, the Church enters the Triodion period with three powerful parables told on each successive Sunday: the Publican and the Pharisee; the Prodigal Son and, the Last Judgment.

Then, beginning on Clean Monday (so named because it ushers in a period of strict fasting) and lasting for 40 days in addition to the Holy Week, Orthodox Christians are invited to transform themselves through asceticism, through almsgiving, through forgiveness, through repentance and through prayer.

The essence of Orthodox spirituality is to work with God by doing His will and attracting His Grace, eventually reaching the state which the Apostle Paul wrote about in his Letter to the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

For Orthodox, the Lenten period is a time characterized by "joyful sorrow" or "bright sadness." The constant contemplation of Christ's crucifixion, along with the self-denial and struggle is overshadowed by the certainty of His coming Resurrection.

It is also a time when we think and pray for those individuals and communities persecuted for their unwavering faith.

We think of the two Orthodox bishops abducted in Syria last week while on a humanitarian mission, along with the challenges the historic Patriarchate of Antioch faces. We think of Coptic Christians in Egypt who have suffered so much the last few years. We think of Archbishop John, a Canonical Orthodox Bishop that continues to be illegally imprisoned by the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. And we think of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, still denied full freedom of religion in Turkey including the continued closure of its Theological School in Halki.

Throughout the struggles, however, we remain steadfast in our faith in Christ and as we celebrate His Resurrection early Sunday morning and chant "**Christ Is Risen!**" we realize that our faith is anything but futile.

