

**GREAT LENT**  
**THE TIME OF REPENTANCE**  
Fr Alexander Schmemmann

"Brethren, while fasting bodily, let us also fast spiritually; let us loosen every bond of injustice; let us destroy the strong fetters of violence; let us tear up every unjust writing; let us give bread to the hungry and let us welcome the homeless poor to our houses, that from Christ our God we may receive the great mercy." (*Stichera, Wednesday of the First Week*)

We are approaching again the Great Lent—the time of repentance, the time of our reconciliation with God. Repentance is the beginning and also the condition of a truly Christian life. "Repent!" was the first word of Christ when He began to preach (Matt. 4:17). But what is repentance? In the daily rush of our life we have no time to think about it, we simply take it for granted that we must go to confession, receive absolution, and then forget all about it until next year. Yet there must be a reason why our Church has set apart seven weeks as a special time of repentance and calls each Orthodox Christian to a special spiritual effort. And this reason must obviously concern me, my life, my faith, my membership in the Church. I must try to understand it, to follow as much as I can the teachings of my Church, be Orthodox not only by name, but in life itself. What then is repentance? Great Lent gives the answer to this question. It is indeed a school of repentance, to which each Christian must go every year in order to refresh the understanding of his faith. It is a wonderful pilgrimage to the very sources of Orthodoxy, a rediscovery of a truly Orthodox way of life. Let us try to make these forty days as meaningful, as deep, and as rich, as possible.

In this brief explanation of Lent we shall deal with:

- the preparation for Great Lent,
- the Lenten worship of the Orthodox Church,
- the Orthodox teaching on fasting, prayer and other spiritual efforts prescribed during Lent.

**SUNDAYS OF PREPARATION**

Three weeks before Lent proper begins we enter into a period of pre-Lenten preparation. It is a constant feature of the Orthodox tradition of worship that every major liturgical event—(Christmas, Easter, Lent)—is announced and prepared in advance. Knowing our lack of concentration, the "worldliness" of our life, the Church calls our attention to the seriousness of the approaching event, invites us to meditate on its significance. Thus, before we can practice Lent, we are given its meaning.

This preparation includes four consecutive Sundays preceding Lent, each one of them dedicated to some fundamental aspect of repentance.

## **1. Humility (Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee)**

On the eve of this day (i.e. on Saturday at Vespers) the liturgical book of the Lenten season—the Triodion makes its first appearance and texts from it are added to the usual liturgical material of the weekly Resurrection service. They develop the first major theme of repentance: humility.

The Gospel lesson (Luke 18:10-14) teaches us that humility is the condition of repentance. The parable of the Publican and Pharisee pictures a man who is always pleased with himself and who thinks that he complies with all the requirements of religion. He is proud of himself and self-assured. In reality, however, he has falsified the meaning of religion. He has reduced it to external observations and he measures his piety by the amount of money he gives to the temple. Religion is for him a source of self-admiration. The Publican humbles himself and humility justifies him before God.

"Let us avoid the high-flown speech of the Pharisee"—says the Kontakion of the day—"and learn the majesty of the Publican's humble words."

## **2. Return to the Father (Sunday of the Prodigal Son)**

The Gospel reading of this day (Luke 15:11-32) gives us the second theme of Lent and repentance: that of the return to God. It is not enough to acknowledge sins and to confess them. Repentance remains fruitless without the desire and decision to change life, to go back to God, to begin the movement of ascension and purification. We must realize that we have lost our spiritual beauty and purity and we must want to recover them: "... I shall return to the compassionate Father crying with tears: Receive me as one of Thy servants." At Matins we sing Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.... If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." The Christian remembers and knows that he has lost communion with God, the peace and the joy of His Kingdom, the purity of the new life. For he was baptized, introduced into the Body of Christ, but his sins have driven him away from God. Repentance, therefore, is this desire to return to God, a movement of love and trust: "I have wickedly strayed away from Thy Fatherly glory, and wasted the riches Thou gavest me among sinners. Then do I raise the prodigal's cry unto Thee, O Bountiful Father, I have sinned against Thee: take me back as a penitent, and make me as one of thy hired servants...." (*Kontakion of the day*)

### **3. The Last Judgment (Meat Fare Sunday)**

On Meat Fare Saturday (preceding this Sunday) the Church prescribes the universal commemoration of all her departed members. The Church is unity and love in Christ. We all depend on each other, belong to each other, are united by the love of Christ. Our repentance, therefore, would not be complete without an act of love towards all those who have departed this life before us. Repentance is primarily the recovery of the spirit of love: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Liturgically this commemoration includes Vespers on Friday, Matins and Divine Liturgy on Saturday.

The Sunday Gospel (Matthew 25:31-46) reminds us of the third theme of repentance: preparation for Divine Judgment. A Christian lives under Christ's judgment. This means that we must refer our actions, attitudes, judgments to Christ, to His presence in the world, that we must see Christ in our fellow men. For "inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, you have done it to Me..." The parable of the Last Judgment gives us the "terms of reference" for our self-evaluation as Christians.

On the week following Meat Fare Sunday a limited fasting is prescribed. We must train and prepare ourselves for the great effort of Lent. On Wednesday and Friday the Divine Liturgy is not served and the type of worship is already Lenten. On Cheese-Fare Saturday the Church commemorates all men and women who were "illuminated through fasting"—the Holy Ascetics and Fosters. They are the patterns we must follow, our guides in the difficult art of fasting and repentance.

### **4. Forgiveness (Cheese Fare Sunday)**

This is the last day before Lent. Its liturgy develops three themes: (a) "the expulsion of Adam from the paradise of bliss." Man was created for paradise—for knowledge of God and communion with Him. His sins have deprived him of this blessed life and his existence on earth is an exile. Christ, the God-man, opens the doors of Paradise to every one who follows Him and the Church is our guide to the heavenly fatherland.

(b) Our fast must not be hypocritical, a show off. We must "appear not unto men to fast, but unto our Father who is in secret" (cf. Sunday lesson from Matthew: 6:14-21).

(c) The condition for such real fasting is that we forgive each other as God forgives us—"If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you...."

On the evening of this day, at Vespers, Lent is inaugurated with the Great Prokimenon: "Turn not away Thy face from Thy servant, for I am in trouble; hear me speedily. Attend to my soul and deliver it." At the end of the service the faithful ask forgiveness from one another and the Church begins her pilgrimage towards the joyful and glorious day of Easter.

### **LENTEN WORSHIP**

The Great Lent consists of six weeks or forty days. It begins on Monday after Cheese Fare Sunday and ends on Friday evening before Palm Sunday. The Saturday of Lazarus' Resurrection, Palm Sunday and the Holy Week form a special liturgical cycle with which we shall deal in a special pamphlet.<sup>1</sup>

The meaning and the spirit of the Great Lent find their first and most important expression in worship. Not only individuals but the whole Church acquires a penitential spirit, and the beautiful Lenten services more than anything else help us to deepen our spiritual vision, to reconsider our life in the light of the Orthodox teaching about man. We shall briefly analyze the most important of the liturgical particularities of Lent.

#### **1. The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete**

The Lent begins with the Great Penitential Canon of St. Andrew of Crete. Written in the seventh century by one of the greatest hymn-writers of the Orthodox Church, this canon is the purest expression of repentance. The author contemplates the great history of salvation, recorded in the Old and the New Testaments and applies its various images to the state of his sinful soul. It is a long, pathetic lamentation of a Christian who discovers again and again how much God has loved him, how much He has done for him and how little response came from the man:

"How shall I begin to deplore the deeds of my miserable life?  
What beginning shall I make, O Christ, to this lament?  
But since Thou art compassionate, grant me remission of my trespasses."  
"Like as the potter gives life to his clay,  
Thou hast bestowed upon me  
Flesh and bones, breath and life;  
Today, O my Creator, my Redeemer and  
My Judge,  
Receive me a penitent..."

"I have lost my first made beauty and dignity,  
And now I lie naked and covered with shame..."

And to each one of these troparia the congregation answers: "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me."

The Great Canon is sung and read twice during Lent: in four parts at Great Compline on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of the first week; and again completely at Matins on Thursday of the fifth week. It is a real introduction to Lent, it sets its tone and spirit, it gives us—from the very beginning—the true dimension of repentance.

## **2. The Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian**

On weekdays of Lent this prayer is read twice at the end of each service: first, with a prostration after each of its petitions, then with one final prostration. Here is the text:

"O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk." *Prostration*

"But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to Thy servant." *Prostration*

"Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother; for Thou art blessed unto ages of ages. Amen." *Prostration*

Then all bow twelve times saying: "O God cleanse me, a sinner."

And the whole prayer is read again, with one prostration at the end.

This prayer, constantly repeated throughout the services, is the simplest and purest expression of repentance in all its dimensions: desire for purification, desire for improvement, desire for a real change in relations with other people. The Lenten rules of the Orthodox Church pay great attention to prostrations: through them the body participates in the effort of "breaking down" our pride and self-satisfaction.

## **3. Biblical Readings**

A characteristic feature of Lenten services is the use of the Old Testament, normally absent from the daily cycle of worship. Lessons from three books of the Bible are read daily throughout Lent: Genesis and Proverbs at Vespers, Isaiah at the Sixth Hour. These readings indicate that Lent is a time of preparation, a spiritual return to the Old Testament, which announced and prepared the coming of Christ and the inauguration in Him of a new life. The book of Genesis tells us the story of Creation, Fall and the beginnings of the history of salvation. Proverbs

teach us the Wisdom of God as revealed to man and leading him to repentance and renewal. Finally, Isaiah is the great prophet of Redemption and Salvation, the announcer of the Kingdom of God.

#### **4. The Lenten Hymns**

The liturgical book of Lent is the Triodion. Besides the biblical readings, it contains special Lenten hymns to be sung every day at Matins and Vespers. Of a special beauty are the "idiomela" of St. Theodore of Stoudion, short penitential hymns, one sung at Matins and one at Vespers, which more than anything else express the Lenten spirituality of the Orthodox Church. Here are a few examples:

"Let us begin, O people the spotless fast, for it is the salvation of our souls. Let us make our devotion to the Lord in fear, anointing our heads with the oil of good works and washing our faces with pure water, Not many worded in prayer, but saying as we have been taught to say. Our Father Who art in heaven! Forgive us our trespasses, For Thou art the lover of mankind." (*Tuesday Matins, First Week*)

"O come ye faithful, let us work the works of God in light, Let us walk honestly as in the day, let us cast away from ourselves every unjust writing against our neighbor, and not put a stumbling block as an occasion for his falling on the way; Let us put away the pleasures of the flesh; Let us increase the graces of our souls; Let us give bread to those in need; Let us draw near to Christ in penitence, crying out: "Have mercy on us, O our God!" (*Friday Vespers, First Week*)

"Why art thou idle, O my soul? And why dost thou dedicate thyself to sin? Why art thou weak yet not come to the physician? Now is the fruitful time, and now is the real day of salvation. Arise! Wash thyself in the tears of repentance and enlighten thy lamp with the oil of good works, That thou mayest obtain from God forgiveness and great mercy." (*Tuesday Matins, Second Week*)

"Arriving midway on that road of fasting which leads to Thy venerable cross, And hoping for a glimpse of that day when Abraham caught up Isaac from the grave We entreat Thee to make us partakers of Thy mystical supper Who are saved by faith and cry out to Thee:

O our Light and our Saviour, glory to Thee." (*Wednesday Matins, Fourth Week*)

The Triodion contains wonderful riches: short three-ode canons (hence the name "Triodion"), kathismata (stanzas sung after the psalms), hymns to the Holy Trinity, etc. Of all the liturgical books it is one of the most inspiring, most directly connected with the spiritual needs of man.

### **5. The Psalter**

The Psalms occupy a very central position in Orthodox worship. But in Lent the use of the psalter is doubled. Normally it is read once every week; during Lent it is read twice. Of course this is done mainly in monasteries, yet it is important to know that the Church considers the psalms to be an essential spiritual food for the Lenten season.

### **6. The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts**

On weekdays of Lent (Monday through Friday) the celebration of the Divine Liturgy is strictly forbidden. They are non-liturgical days (with one possible exception, the Feast of Annunciation). The reason for this rule is that the Eucharist is by its very nature a festal celebration, the joyful commemoration of Christ's Resurrection and glorification and His presence among His disciples. But twice a week, on Wednesday and Fridays, the Church prescribes the celebration after Vespers, i.e., in the evening, of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. It consists of solemn Great Vespers and communion with the Holy Gifts consecrated on the previous Sunday. These days being days of strict fasting (theoretically: complete abstinence), are "crowned" with the partaking of the Bread of life, the ultimate fulfillment of our efforts....

"... When Thou has freed us and Thy faithful people from all impurities, sanctify the souls and bodies of all of us with a sanctification not to be taken away; that with a clear conscience, peaceful presence and enlightened hearts we may participate in those divine Sacraments, and be quickened through them and become one with Thy Christ Himself, our true God, Who said: Who so eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood, abides in Me and I in Him. So that by Thy Word dwelling in us and walking with us we may become, O Lord, a temple of Thine all-holy and adored spirit ..." (*Prayer at the Presanctified Liturgy*)

### **7. Liturgical Music and Vestments**

The spirit of Lent is also expressed in the liturgical music. Special lenten tones and melodies are used for responses at litanies, for the "Alleluias" and the hymns of the Presanctified Liturgy. Slow, deep and solemn, these melodies provoke in us a

longing for purity, and also the sadness for not living up to the "pristine beauty" for which we were created....

And finally, as an external symbol of this state of repentance, preparation and humility, dark purple vestments are used in the Church.

### **8. Saturdays and Sundays of Lent**

Lenten Saturdays, with the exception of the first, dedicated to the memory of the Holy Martyr Theodore Tyron, and the fifth, the Saturday of the Akathistos, are days of commemoration of the departed. And it would be good to restore this practice of one weekly universal commemoration of all Orthodox Christians departed this life, of their integration in the Eucharist which is always offered "on behalf of all and for all."

Each Sunday in Lent, although it preserves its basic meaning: that of the weekly feast of Resurrection, has its own special theme:

The First Sunday—**Triumph of Orthodoxy**—commemorates the victory of the Church over the last major heresy: Iconoclasm (842).

The second Sunday is dedicated to the memory of **St. Gregory Palamas**, a great Byzantine mystic and theologian of the 14th century, who centered his teaching on the high calling of man, on his "deification" in Christ.

The third Sunday is the Sunday "of the **Veneration of the Holy Cross**." At Matins the Cross is brought in a solemn procession from the sanctuary and placed in the center of the Church, where it remains for the whole week. This rite announces the approaching of the Holy Week, with its commemoration of Christ's Passion. A special veneration of the Cross takes place at the end of each service.

Fourth Sunday—**St. John of the Ladder**, one of the greatest Ascetics, who in his "Spiritual Ladder" described the various stages of spiritual life.

Fifth Sunday—**St. Mary of Egypt**, whose life is a most wonderful example of repentance.

On Saturdays and Sundays, days of Eucharistic celebration, the dark vestments are replaced by light ones, the Lenten melodies are not sung and the prayer of St. Ephrem with prostrations is omitted. The order of services is not of the Lenten type, yet fasting remains a rule and cannot be broken. Each Sunday night at Great Vespers a special Great Prokimenon (verses from a psalm) inaugurates a new week in the penitential effort.

## **HOW CAN WE KEEP GREAT LENT?**

It is obviously impossible for us to go to Church every day. And since we cannot keep the Lent liturgically, the question arises: what is our participation in Lent, how can we spiritually profit by it? The Church calls us to deepen our religious conscience, to increase and strengthen the spiritual contents of our life, to follow her in her pilgrimage towards renewal and rededication to God.

### **1. Fasting**

The first universal precept is that of fasting. The Orthodox teaching concerning fasting is different from the Roman Catholic doctrine and it is essential to understand it. Roman Catholics identify fasting with a "good deed," see in it a sacrifice which earns us a "merit." "What shall I give up for Lent?"—this question is very typical of such an attitude toward fasting. Fasting thus is a formal obligation, an act of obedience to the Church, and its value comes precisely from obedience. The Orthodox idea of fasting is first of all that of an ascetical effort. It is the effort to subdue the physical, the fleshly man to the spiritual one, the "natural" to the "supernatural." Limitations in food are instrumental; they are not ends in themselves. Fasting thus is but a means of reaching a spiritual goal and, therefore, an integral part of a wide spiritual effort. Fasting, in the Orthodox understanding, includes more than abstinence from certain types of food. It implies prayer, silence, an internal disposition of mind, an attempt to be charitable, kind, and—in one word—spiritual. "Brethren, while fasting bodily, let us also fast spiritually...."

And because of this the Orthodox doctrine of fasting excludes the evaluation of fasting in terms of a "maximum" or "minimum." Every one must find his maximum, weigh his conscience and find in it his "pattern of fasting." But this pattern must necessarily include the spiritual as well as the "bodily" elements. The Typicon and the canons of the Church give the description of an ideal fast: no dairy products, total abstinence on certain days. "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (Matt. 19:12). But, whatever is our measure—our fasting must be a total effort of our total being.

According to the rules of the Church the fast cannot be broken for the entire Lenten period of forty days: Saturdays and Sundays are no exception.

### **2. Prayer**

We must always pray. But Lent is the time of an increase of prayer and also of its deepening. The simplest way is, first, to add the Lenten prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian to our private morning and evening prayers. Then, it is good and profitable to set certain hours of the day for a short prayer: this can be done "internally"—at the office, in the car, everywhere. The important thing here is to remember

constantly that we are in Lent, to be spiritually "referred" to its final goal: renewal, penitence, closer contact with God.

### **3. Spiritual Reading**

We cannot be in church daily, but it is still possible for us to follow the Church's progress in Lent by reading those lessons and books which the Church reads in her worship. A chapter of the Book of Genesis, some passages from Proverbs and Isaiah do not take much time, and yet they help us in understanding the spirit of Lent and its various dimensions. It is also good to read a few Psalms—in connection with prayer or separately. Nowhere else can we find such concentration of true repentance, of thirst for communion with God, of desire to permeate the whole of life with religion. Finally, a religious book: Lives of the Saints, History of the Church, Orthodox Spirituality, etc. is a "must" while we are in Lent. It takes us from our daily life to a higher level of interests, it feeds us with ideas and facts which are usually absent from our "practical" and "efficient" world.

### **4. Change of Life**

And, last but not least: there must be an effort and a decision to slow down our life, to put in as much quiet, silence, contemplation, meditation. Radio, TV, newspapers, social gatherings—all these things, however excellent and profitable in themselves, must be cut down to a real minimum. Not because they are bad, but because we have something more important to do, and it is impossible to do without a change of life, without some degree of concentration and discipline. Lent is the time when we re-evaluate our life in the light of our faith, and this requires a very real effort and discipline. Christ says that a narrow path leads to the kingdom of God and we must make our life as narrow as possible. At first the natural and selfish man in us revolts against these limitations. He wants his usual "easy life" with all its pleasures and relaxations. But once we have tasted of such spiritual effort, once we have made by it one step towards God, the reward is great! We discover a joy that cannot be compared to any other joy. We discover the reality of the spiritual world in us. We begin to understand what St. Paul meant by "the joy and peace in the Holy Spirit." God Himself enters our soul: and it is this wonderful coming that constitutes the ultimate end of Lent:

"If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him and we will come unto him and make our abode with him." (John 14:23)

Let us make this Great Lent a real Lent!