

CATECHETICAL HOMILY
AT THE OPENING
OF HOLY AND GREAT LENT
+ **BARTHOLOMEW**
BY GOD'S MERCY
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,
TOGETHER WITH OUR PRAYER, BLESSING AND FORGIVENESS
BE WITH YOU ALL

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Most honorable brothers and blessed children in the Lord,

With the good-will and grace of God, the giver of all good things, we are entering Holy and Great Lent, the arena of ascetic struggles. The Church knows the labyrinths of the human soul and the thread of Ariadne, the way out of all impasse – humility, repentance, the power of prayer and the sacred services of contrition, fasting that eliminates the passions, patience, obedience to the rule of piety. And so the Church invites us once again this year to a divinely inspired journey, whose measure is the Cross and whose horizon is the Resurrection of Christ.

The veneration of the Cross in the middle of Holy and Great Lent reveals the meaning of this whole period. The word of our Lord echoes strikingly: “Whoever desires to follow me ... let them lift their cross *each day* and follow me” (Lk 9.23). We are called to lift our own cross, following the Lord and beholding His life-giving Cross, with the awareness that the Lord is the one that saves and not the lifting of our cross. The Cross of the Lord is “the judgment of our criteria,” “the judgment of the world,” and at the same time the promise that evil in all its forms does not have the final word in history. In looking to Christ and under His protection, as the One who permits our struggle, while blessing and strengthening our effort, we fight the good fight, “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4.8–9). This is the experiential quintessence also during the present period of the Cross and the Resurrection. We are on a journey to the Resurrection through the Cross, through which “joy has come to the whole world.”

Some of you may wonder why the Church, in the midst of the current pandemic, would add to the already existing health restrictions yet another “quarantine,” namely Great Lent. Indeed, Great Lent is also a “quarantine,” a period that lasts forty days. Nevertheless, the Church does not aim to weaken us further with

additional obligations and prohibitions. On the contrary, it calls us to give meaning to the quarantine that we are living as a result of the coronavirus, through Great Lent, as liberation from enslavement to “the things of our world.”

Today’s Gospel reading establishes the conditions of this liberation. The first condition is fasting, not in the sense of abstaining only from specific foods, but also from those habits that keep us attached to the world. Such abstinence does not comprise an expression of contempt of the world, but a necessary precondition for reorienting our relationship with the world and for experiencing the unique joy of discovering the world as the domain of Christian witness. This is why, even during this stage of fasting, the approach and experience of the life of the faithful have a paschal dimension, the taste of the Resurrection. The “Lenten atmosphere” is not depressing, but joyous. It is the “great joy” that was proclaimed as good news by the angel “to all people” at the birth of the Savior (Lk 2.10). This is the unwavering “fulness of joy” (1 Jn 1.4) of life in Christ. Christ is always present in our life – He is closer to us than we are to ourselves – all the days of our life, “unto the end of the ages” (Mt 28.20). The life of the Church is an unshakeable witness to the grace that has come and to the hope of the Kingdom, to the fullness of revelation of the mystery of the Divine Economy.

Faith is the response to God’s loving condescension to us; it is the “Yes” of our whole existence to Him, who “bowed the heavens and descended” in order to redeem the human race “from the slavery of the enemy” and in order to open for us the way toward deification through grace. The sacrificial love for the neighbor and the “care” for the whole creation spring from and are nurtured by this gift of grace. If this charitable love for others and the god-pleasing concern for creation are absent, then my neighbor becomes “my hell” and creation is abandoned to irrational forces, which transform it into an object of exploitation and into a hostile environment for humankind.

The second condition of the liberation promised by Great Lent is forgiveness. Oblivion of divine mercy and God’s ineffable beneficence, breach of the Lord’s commandment that we should become “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt 5.13-14), and a false transformation of the Christian way of life: to all of these attitudes leads a “closed spirituality” that thrives on the denial and rejection of the “other” and of the world, wipes out love, forgiveness and the acceptance of the different. Yet, this barren and arrogant attitude of life is denounced emphatically by the word of the Gospel on the first three Sundays of the Triodion.

It is known that such extremes are especially prevalent during periods when the Church invites its faithful to spiritual discipline and vigilance. However, the authentic spiritual life is a way of internal renewal, an exodus from our selves, a loving movement toward our neighbor. It is not based on syndromes of purity and exclusion, but on forgiveness and discernment, doxology and thanksgiving, according to the experiential wisdom of the ascetic tradition: “It is not food, but gluttony that is evil ... not speaking, but idle speech ... not the world, but the passions.”

With this attitude and these sentiments, we join our prayers with all of you, beloved brothers and children, that we may definitively overcome the lethal pandemic and swiftly respond to its social and economic consequences. And we ask for your beseeching supplications, too, for the reopening of the Sacred Theological School of Halki, after a long period of fifty years that has passed since its silence was imposed externally and fully unjustly, as we welcome Holy and Great Lent in the Church, singing and chanting together “God is with us,” to Whom belongs the glory and might to the endless ages. Amen!

Holy and Great Lent 2021

✠ **BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople**

Fervent supplicant for all before God

To be read in churches on Cheesefare Sunday, March 14, 2021, immediately after the Holy Gospel.