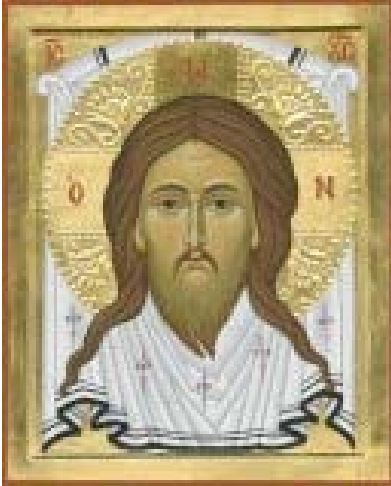


CATECHETICAL HOMILY

On 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
Grace and Peace from our Lord and Savior
Jesus Christ With our Prayer, Blessing and
Forgiveness

Beloved brothers and children in the Lord,

“The arena of the virtues has opened; those who desire to compete may enter, girding themselves with the good struggle of fasting.” (Triodion, Cheesefare Sunday) Or, better, the arena has always remained open, from the time that the All-Merciful Lord of Glory deemed it worthy to assume our nature. Since then, through His Church, he invites every person to participate in the boundless gifts of the grace of the Holy Spirit, particularly during this blessed period of Holy and Great Lent.

Beloved children in the Lord, the boundless goodness of our God, who is truly worshipped in the Trinity, created the human race solely out of love in order to render us human beings – to the degree that is possible for human nature – sharers and participants of the grandeur of His sacred glory. This is the exclusive purpose of life at all times. Indeed, in order to achieve this purpose, the holy and inspired tradition of the Orthodox Church comes to our support, instructing, interpreting and including the entire spectrum of the spiritual life by means of various struggles, with which the faithful must always advance courageously.

Through the holy Sacrament of Baptism, each Christian received the grace of the Holy Spirit. If we begin to love God with all our heart, then this grace transmits to us in an incomprehensible way the wealth of its benefits. Whoever wishes to retain this experience of grace should strive with great joy to renounce from the soul the benefits of the present age in order to acquire the hidden wealth of true life. To the same degree that the soul advances in this spiritual struggle, the sacred gift of divine grace reveals the Lord's goodness concealed in the depth of the soul in order to become the sure guide in the manifold spiritual struggle. (St. Diadochus of Photike, Century 77)

This spiritual struggle is ongoing for every faithful. Therefore, it requires us to start anew each day, each moment. “The time has come for the beginning of spiritual struggle, the victory of demons, the armor of virtue, the conduct of angels, the boldness before God.” (Lauds, Cheesefare Sunday) Great Lent precisely resembles a constant beginning of spiritual regeneration and renewal. This is why the hymnographer of the Triodion correctly orientates us toward its proper content, stating that bodily fasting by renouncing certain foods cannot result in remedy and is even despised by God as false, unless it is accompanied

by purity that results from renouncing the spiritual passions (Lauds, Wednesday of Cheesefare Week).

Of course, focusing the intellect on the work of knowing God, in order to return it from passionate dispersion, comprises a toilsome and time-consuming labor. However, it is necessary and definitive for our spiritual wellbeing and social life. The way of virtue appears difficult and extremely unpleasant to those who undertake the journey; yet, not because it is actually like this, but because human nature has become accustomed to the ease of pleasure. For those who have succeeded in reaching the middle of this journey, in fact it appears pleasant and effortless (St. Diadochus of Photike, Century 93).

Frequently, those who cannot understand the great mystery of this piety consider the Orthodox ascetic tradition as negative and as leading to deprivation of creativity, of original initiative, of enjoyment in life's pleasure. Nothing could be further from the truth. All that was created by God was created "very good" and offered to us in order to delight in and enjoy in order for us to give continual glory to our Benefactor. The commandments of God guide us and inform us in the proper use of these divine gifts, so that our body, mind and soul, together with all the material gifts, may be truly joyful and beneficial for our life. On the contrary, the arrogant, independent and contemptuous use of material gifts offered to us by the Creator result in entirely different goals to God's expectations, leading us to depression, anxiety and misfortune, even though appearing to satisfy human pride momentarily.

Our Savior, who is truly divine and truly human, who is incomprehensibly known to the humble and those capable of receiving His uncreated grace, the Lord of glory and Lord of history, who directs our soul and mind, who contains the universe in His divine providence – from the smallest particle of His creation to the most inconceivable aspect of our world, is eternally the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (John 14.6) Just as the hypostatic source of Life could not possibly be held by death, which was crushed through His resurrection, so too there could not possibly be any positive human life without participation in the life-creating Body of the Risen Christ, the Orthodox Church, and the inspired Holy Tradition. In brief, the Lord reigns forever, while the ideas of the proud are proved false. Or, as St. Diadochus so wonderfully says: "There is nothing poorer than a mind endeavoring to philosophize about God without God."

Beloved children in the Lord, upon entering the arena of Holy and Great Lent, we paternally exhort you not to be afraid or lazy in assuming the most important task of your life, namely the spiritual arena of work. Instead, be courageous and strong, so that you may purify your souls and bodies of all sin in order to reach the Kingdom of God, which is granted already from this life to those who seek it with sincerity and with all their soul.

May the grace of God and His boundless mercy be with you all.

Holy and Great Lent 2011

*+ **Bartholomew of Constantinople***

Fervent supplicant to God for all