



Great Lent

REFLECTIONS FOR YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



INTERNATIONAL ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHARITIES

GREAT LENT is often referred to as a spiritual journey, a time to descend from our mind, filled with worries and distractions, to the stillness of our heart where we can more clearly hear God's voice and direction for our life. During this period we participate with God's grace in a more intentional way in order to be conformed to His likeness. And, as we grow more Christ-like, we respond like Christ with compassion, sacrifice and love to those around us whose lives have been torn apart by natural and man-made disaster.

At the forefront of IOCC's compassionate, sacrificial and loving response to our brothers and sisters in need in America are 101 members of the IOCC Frontline. These specially trained Orthodox clergy and laypeople have been on the frontlines, providing spiritual and emotional care on the heels of turbulent events such as Superstorm Sandy, the bombings at the Boston Marathon and flooding in the Midwest. We invite you to read the inspiring words of six of our IOCC Frontliners as they share their personal spiritual reflections on each week of Lent.



The Sunday of Orthodoxy

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Bishop JOHN, Antiochian Orthodox
Bishop of Worcester and New England,
IOCC Frontliner

"One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." (Ephesians 4:5)

St. Paul calls us to recognize our God-given unity which is in Christ so that we can share in this unity which is in God the Father. To share our lives with God and each other is indeed what it means for us to be complete as persons. We are created by God to share in His image and likeness; indeed we are created by God to share in His life and ministry. To be really human is to be like God because God made humans to be like Himself. This is accomplished in unity with Him. Therefore we can only be happy or content when we are being and doing what God created us to be and do.

Praise God and serve Him
as we encounter him in the suffering
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St. Paul continues in Ephesians to explain what Jesus accomplished by taking on flesh. Christ descended from heaven so that He could praise the Father and take care of us. He did so in our midst to be an example for us. He then ascended into heaven, sharing His life with us making our way to ascend with Him. As much as we choose to join Christ in His ministry of praising God the Father with Him and taking care of His creation with Him, we share in His life which is the eternal life of the Trinity.

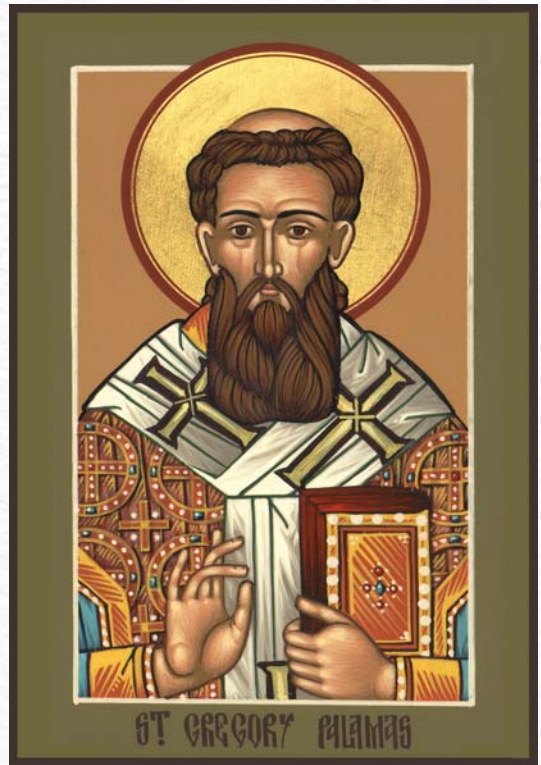
Christ took on flesh to praise God and serve man. IOCC is an opportunity for Orthodox Christians in America to unite, and in our unity with God and each other, to praise God and serve Him as we encounter Him in the suffering men, women and children we find in crises and in need. IOCC needs our support and dedication to accomplish this work and we need IOCC and other efforts like it to share in the life and unity God created us to share in.

Saint Gregory Palamas

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Rev. Angelo Pappas, IOCC Frontliner

On the Second Sunday of Great Lent, a Sunday when we remember St. Gregory Palamas, we need to examine ourselves as to who we are within the spiritual realm of our existence. It seems in today's world, society and culture, we continue to revert back to our primitive state of hatred, contempt and distrust. Not looking to our Savior Jesus Christ for peace in our soul, and to offer love and compassion to our brothers in need. To show Christ's



mercy and forgiveness to those who have wronged, not only us personally, but on a larger scale, whatever that scale may be.

In our self-examination during the Lenten Season, we need to turn away from the errors of the world, to turn closer to Christ, and ask for His intervention in the crisis that exists globally. But how can the world change if we haven't changed? Again, through our internal prayer, or as St. Gregory Palamas has taught us, through the integration of hesychasm, or silent prayer. This allows us, as Father John Meyendorff wrote in his book on St. Gregory Palamas, "the positive element in spirituality, acquisition of grace and of the life in Jesus Christ, is based on the uninterrupted monological prayer." This prayer is a memory of God, a conscious activity of the human being, when the Apostle Paul recommended 'to pray continually' (1 Thess. 5:17).

As we grow spiritually in our faith, so will our inner change of heart grow as well. That neighbor that was annoying may not be so annoying after all. Friends who can sometimes be overbearing may need to be seen in a different light. Our spouses or children or relatives may act troubling towards us, because we fail to understand how they love us. Our enemies may not understand us, therefore hate us, but have we tried to get into their mind set or offer an "olive branch" of peace to them? These are critical questions with critical answers.

As Pascha quickly draws near, let our love and joy in the Resurrection of our Lord shine, not briefly flicker on that day alone, but let it glow brightly everyday of our life. May the words of the Evangelist Luke resonate in our souls, *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you and pray for them who persecute you and say evil of you falsely."* (Luke 6:27)

Veneration of the Cross

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Father Jon-Stephen Hedges, IOCC Frontliner

Lent is like a battle. In the middle of battle, a flag is held high to encourage the spirit of warriors, showing them why they fight. Today the church lifts up and venerates the Holy Cross. *"God forbid that I should glory except in the Cross of Jesus."* (Gal. 6:14)

This Cross is deeper than mere wearing or hanging on the wall or signing or proclaiming with words. The Cross Christ carried and hung upon, the Cross He extends to us, is in a place deep in the heart.

In the chaos and the confusion of the daily battles of this life, how is it that we see that Cross and how is it that we connect with that place in our heart where it is?



Seeking the Cross is a struggle. As Christ laid down His Life for us so must we, insofar as we are able, lay down our lives in the holy disciplines of charity, prayer, fasting and forgiveness if we are to find His. What does it mean to lay down our lives?

So must we, in so far as we are able, lay down our lives in the holy disciplines of charity, prayer, fasting and forgiveness.

The Prayer of St. Ephraim is the prayer of the Cross. Speak the words with faith as to Christ on the Cross. You will find your heart bowing as much as your knees. Bowing is the beginning of sacramental charity for the life of the world.

If we desire union with Christ we cannot avoid what He did not. Jesus submitted Himself joyfully to the pain of the Cross because He looked ahead and saw the gain, like a mother looking through the pain of childbirth to see the joy of the child who is to be. The joy of taking up the Cross is that with the Cross comes Christ Himself. Bowing this day is the beginning of sacramental charity for the life of the world.

Saint John Climacus

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Father Miles Zdinak, IOCC Frontliner

The Fourth Sunday of the Holy and Great Fast commemorates St. John Climacus (Ladder). He is called Climacus because of his spiritual instruction to his fellow monastics on asceticism, the spiritual discipline which leads to Godliness. This spiritual writing is entitled, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

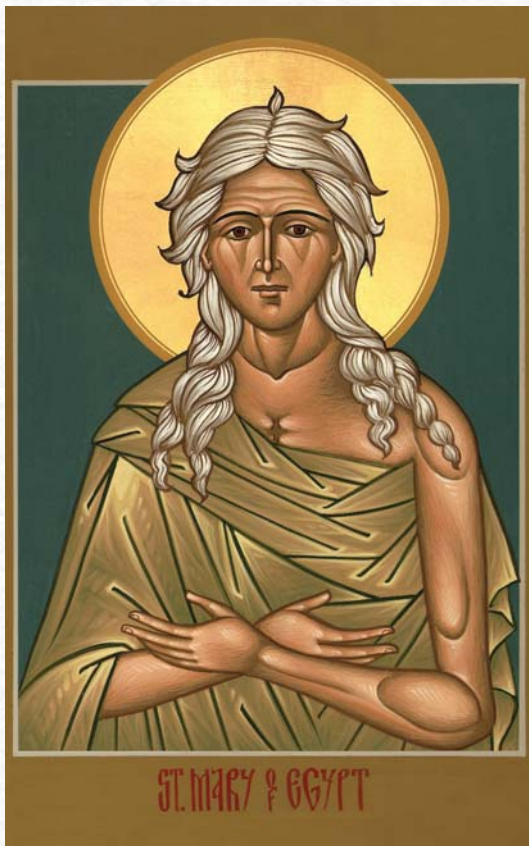


Following *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* helps lead one to a deeper relationship with God and a deeper spiritual relationship with others on the path, which leads to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our own Lenten journey should utilize these same spiritual struggles written of by St. John.

This journey upon the ladder takes the climber from breaking free from the desires of this world to the union with God in stillness, prayer, dispassion, and above all, Love. The last rung of the ladder rests on the divine gifts of Faith, Hope and Love. These gifts open the eyes of the soul to recognize the face of God in others and in His creation. Enlivened by these gifts we become keenly aware of the needs of others. We become compelled by Love to do something to meet the basic wants of

others, whether these needs be for food, drink, clothing, or comfort as spoken by our Lord in the writings of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist Matthew in the Gospel for Sunday of the Last Judgment.

The work of the Church through charitable ministries like missions and relief efforts brings to life the combination of Love for God and service to others. Nowhere else does the Church fulfill better the command of God to love others than in the ministry of service. By supporting IOCC through prayer, contributions, and participation, we become servants doing unto Christ as we do unto others. May you be blessed during the remainder of your Lenten Journey and Good Pascha to you.



Saint Mary of Egypt

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Chaplain Eleni Fredlund, IOCC Frontliner

"The road of cleansing goes through the desert. It shall be named the way of holiness." (Isaiah 35:8)

On the fifth Sunday of Lent, we celebrate the venerable St. Mary of Egypt. Her life as a hermitess is a radiant example of repentance through prayer and fasting. Born in Egypt around 344, she fled to Alexandria in her youth and lived as a prostitute for 17 years. After that time, she traveled to Jerusalem in hopes of new adventures and arrived on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. When Mary tried to enter church where the sacred relic was venerated, an unseen force prevented her from entering. Thus, a most precious gift was offered. Mary was given the opportunity to view her life and choose a different path.

*Asceticism is ... a gift to all people
as an opportunity for
soulful inspection and preparation*

Mary hid in the church courtyard, weeping with remorse for the life she had led. In fear and humility, she turned to an icon of the Mother of God and begged for permission to enter the church and venerate the Cross. She promised to renounce her old life and go wherever God led her. Encouraged by prayer and hoping for mercy, she approached the church entrance and was allowed to enter. The second gift was given. After venerating the Holy Cross, she returned to the icon and while praying, heard a voice say, "If you cross the Jordan, you will find true peace."



Mary heeded the voice and traveled to Jordan that evening. She received Holy Communion the next morning in the monastery of St. John the Baptist, and then crossed the river into her new life.

For 47 years, Mary lived in the desert, fasting on plants, not seeing a single human being, and beset by tribulations mitigated by her prayers to the Most Pure One. At the end of that time, a priest named Zosimus left his monastery to spend Lent in the desert.

The person he found in the desert was not Mary of Alexandria, but St. Mary of Egypt, whose heart and ego had been transformed, who was forgiven and loved by God, and lifted to heaven to

join her eternal family. The third gift was now apparent. The kingdom of heaven is within, and that is where we must begin. Asceticism is not exclusively for priests and monks, but a gift to all people as an opportunity for soulful inspection and preparation.

As we withdraw from the world and devote ourselves to prayer and fasting as St. Mary of Egypt did, we are able to hear the whispers of unconditional love, support, and healing always present in the desert of our heart.

During this solitude, our hearts are transformed regardless of circumstances, so that we may enter the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus.

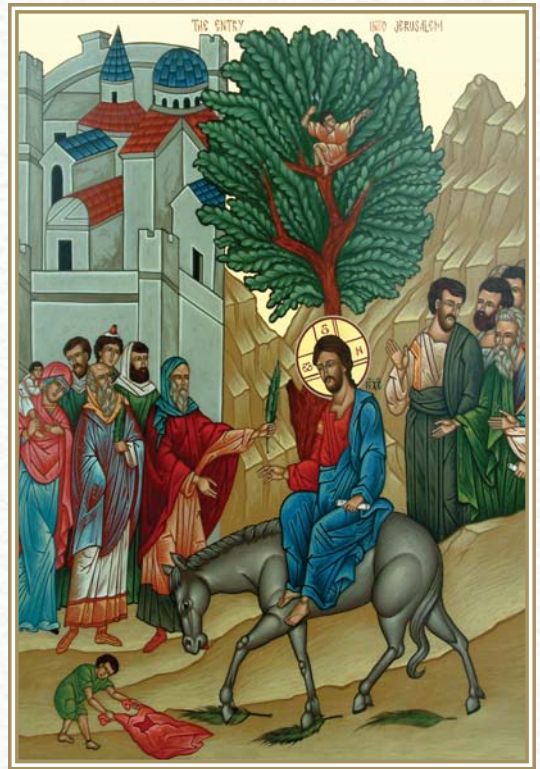
Palm Sunday

Archpriest Alexander F. C. Webster, PhD
Chaplain (Colonel) U. S. Army, Ret.
IOCC Frontliner

The first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem inaugurated the greatest week of humanitarian generosity in history. Another procession in Appomattox, Virginia, on April 12, 1865, Palm Sunday in the West, marked a quieter humanitarian moment. This is a tale of two processions.

The Union Army of General Grant at the surrender of the Confederate Army of General Lee could have behaved in the usual crude, triumphalist manner of victors. The Confederates wept as they lay down their arms, but Grant allowed the defeated officers to retain their sidearms and all the men their mounts. "The horses and mules will be needed for the spring planting," he decided. More dramatic was the decision of Brigadier General Chamberlain, hero of Gettysburg, now in charge of the detail. As bedraggled Confederates proceeded down the gauntlet, Union soldiers lining both sides stood at attention in silence.

In one procession, palm branches were laid before the approaching Jesus of Nazareth. In the other procession, rifles and swords were laid in a pile by vanquished warriors. In one event, the crowd shouted "Hosanna!" but their fickleness and dishonor would be displayed five days later at Golgotha. In the other event, Union troops in the stillness of Appomattox paid silent tribute to brother warriors, with honor and respect. In Jerusalem a glorious entrance by the Lord was soon followed by a crushing defeat and destruction on Calvary. In Appomattox a crushing defeat and destruction of an army was transfigured in a moment of glory. The United States was united once again. No victors and



vanquished, only a band of brothers, some in blue, others in gray.

There is, however, one transcendent connection. General Chamberlain could not have been so compassionate and forgiving toward the Confederates if the original Palm Sunday procession had not occurred, if the Lord had not been executed on the Cross, and if the Lord had not risen on the third day, conquering death by death and showing us how forgiveness is more powerful than vengeance.

Palm Sunday in Appomattox healed and saved a divided nation. Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, continuing to the Empty Tomb, healed and saved a divided world. On this Palm Sunday, we Orthodox are called to demonstrate our love for humanity by forgiving our enemies, serving the least of our brethren, and sharing our largesse with philanthropies such as IOCC.

*Your Lenten gift will be a blessing for our
brothers and sisters in need around the world.*

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