

GREAT LENT

Service as Almsgiving



INTERNATIONAL
ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN
CHARITIES

Weekly
Spiritual Reflections

Service as Almsgiving

Introduction

H. E. Metropolitan Nicolae
Romanian Orthodox Metropolia
of the Americas & Liaison Bishop
to IOCC from the Assembly of
Canonical Orthodox Bishops

As we begin our journey once more to Pascha, the celebration of our Lord Jesus Christ's trampling down death by death, I invite you to enter this holy season with reflection. We are called during this time to devote additional effort to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – thus, we mark Great Lent as a season apart. Let us carefully examine our thoughts, words, and deeds, seeking to make them reflections of God's mercy, so generously bestowed on us.

These pages offer considerations written by IOCC board members, past and current. They offer thoughts on the service we each offer to Christ through IOCC, directly and indirectly, as we care for the physical and emotional needs of people who have survived disasters or who face adversity every day. Those who have seen their lives disturbed, whether by floods or hurricanes or conflict or poverty, are those whom Christ calls His Church to lovingly serve. And when we do, we offer hope for renewed life, despite hardship.

As we journey through Great Lent in the hope of Resurrection, let us look to this call to service, and consider ways that service might be alms. Let us keep always before us the example of Christ, the One who washed His disciples' feet, that we may humbly serve wherever we are able.





The Sunday of Orthodoxy

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Very Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky
Director of External Affairs
and Interchurch Relations,
Orthodox Church in America

*He found Philip and
said to him, "Follow Me."
—John 1:43*

Christ's call to those who seek salvation is straightforward: Follow Me. And the remarkable thing is that so many did: they chose to leave what they knew and accompany a charismatic stranger along a path they could not imagine. They believed Him, and they acted on that conviction by following Him.

Follow Me. I think it is worthwhile, as we begin the journey of Great and Holy Lent, to hear these words with fresh ears.

To follow Christ—and holy Scripture makes this clear—is to serve our neighbor. Christ, through Whom all things were made, became a human being and served others with deep compassion. He fed the hungry, He healed the sick, He washed His followers' feet.

As we follow Christ toward the Cross this Lent, let us renew our commitment to serving wherever and whenever we can, in ways small or large, because this is our offering to Christ.

*Most Holy Trinity, give me strength
for the journey that lies ahead,
and give me the heart of a servant,
that I may humbly offer myself to You.*

St. Gregory Palamas

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Rev. Luke Palumbis
St. Basil the Great Greek Orthodox Church,
Houston, Texas

*“O Gregory the Miracle Worker, ...
preacher of grace, intercede forever
that our souls may be saved.”
—Apolytikion of St. Gregory Palamas.*

The pilgrimage of Great Lent is the Church’s invitation for the faithful to recognize and receive the gift of God’s grace.

Recognizing God’s grace begins with recognizing our need for it. Individuals and communities alike eventually come to the understanding that life offers both opportunities and challenges—many explored and overcome through self-efforts or the help of others; others bring us to the humbling realization that they’re beyond our capacity to navigate. In this moment of self-awareness, we have the greatest opportunity to mature in our faith, accepting that we need God. Such maturity positions us to receive His grace.

Journeying to receive God’s grace is the path embarked upon by Christians. Knowing that He can offer His grace in any way He chooses, we respond by investing where He has assured us He does—we participate in the life of His Church.

Often misunderstood as a period of tasks and legalism, Great Lent is an opportunity to remind ourselves that we need Him, and that He is present for us in His Church.

In this Sunday’s Gospel reading, the paralytic and his peers understand that they need Christ, and they present themselves to Him so that something beyond their



control can take place by His grace. Each of us can offer to Christ the opportunities and challenges in our lives, and in the lives of others, by coming to Church during Great Lent. His grace is waiting for you—rejoice!

*We thank you, our King and our God,
for the gift of Your grace,
and Your rich blessings.
Make us careful stewards of those gifts
that we may serve our neighbors.*



Veneration of the Cross

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Rev. Dn. Paul Zaharas, Chancellor,
Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Denver

*Whoever desires to come
after Me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross, and follow Me.
—Mark 9:34-35*

At the mid-point of our Lenten journey, the Church strengthens and fortifies us by calling to mind Christ's precious and life-giving Cross. This Sunday's Gospel passage reminds us that following Christ—walking the path of salvation—is not easy, but rather involves sacrifice. Following Him comes at a personal cost, and each one of us is asked to endure our own unique difficulties. We are called to bear our own cross in imitation of the Savior, in humility and seeking God's mercy.

When we commemorate the Cross on this third Sunday of the Great Fast, and as we venerate it for its power and role in Christ's victory over death, let us also think about the cost of following Him. Let us consider the price of serving our Lord and the fruit that our own personal sacrifices, for the sake of others, will bring: "For whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35).

When we serve our brothers and sisters in need, we offer our gifts and ourselves to Christ Himself. Through our selfless acts we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow the Lord, and in this way heed His command.

*Christ our God, teach us to humbly
bear our cross as we seek to follow You.
Give us eyes to see where need exists and
generosity to serve as You served.
Through the power of Your precious
Cross, grant to us Your great mercy and
teach us to embody Your compassion.*

St. John Climacus

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Very Rev. Michael Ellias
St. Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Church,
Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, New York

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." –Mark 9:29

This Sunday, the fourth in our pilgrimage toward Christ's Resurrection, the Church in its wisdom holds up as an example of asceticism a great saint whose life and writings can inspire those who honor him. St. John Climacus, or St. John of the Ladder, was the abbot of St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai in the sixth century.

St. John stands as a witness to the spiritual effort that is necessary both for our Lenten journey and for our entrance into the Kingdom of God. The spiritual struggle of the Christian life is "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of the present darkness" (Ephesians 6:12). We must, therefore, take steps to become detached from things of this world and to cling more closely to God alone. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are our spiritual resources. During Great Lent the Church reminds us to draw our attention away from daily distractions, desires, and passions and to place it once again on our ultimate goal, union with our merciful and holy God.

St. John encourages the faithful in their efforts and reminds us that "he who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13). How can we achieve this? We can draw spiritual strength through the sacraments and by humbly practicing the disciplines handed down to us in the Church. If we are to be one with Christ, we must also serve as He served, seeing those in need around us and around the world.



*Most Holy God, give us compassion to see
and to serve wherever needed, and cleanse
our hearts that we may seek only You.*

ST. ZOSIMA

ST. MARY

OF EGYPT



St. Mary of Egypt

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Dr. Gayle Woloschak
Professor, Feinberg School of Medicine,
Northwestern University

In you the image was preserved with exactness, O Mother; for taking up your cross, you did follow Christ, and by your deeds you did teach us ... to attend to the soul.

—Apolytikion, Plagal of the Fourth Tone

Nearing the end of the Lenten journey, we see Pascha approaching, but we have not arrived yet. The story of St. Mary of Egypt demonstrates that it is never too late in life—or Lent—to attend to eternal matters.

St. Mary initially lived a life of debauchery. She once traveled to Jerusalem with some

pilgrims, herself looking for fun; upon attempting to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, she felt a force preventing her. Suddenly aware of her impurity, she prayed for forgiveness and was able to enter. She repented, received absolution, and entered the wilderness, where she lived in fasting and repentance for the rest of her life.

Sometimes we too experience a moment of realization. We must repent. And after repentance comes action. Though we are not all called to solitude as St. Mary was, we can all turn from sin, toward Christ. When we fast, we grow our compassion for the hungry and the poor, as well as our knowledge of how much we need God's mercy.

O Holy Trinity, teach me to repent and to honor You by offering service to Your children near and far.

Palm Sunday

SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT

H. E. Metropolitan Nicolae
Romanian Orthodox Metropolia
of the Americas & Liaison Bishop
to IOCC from the Assembly of
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*Hosanna! Blessed is He who
comes in the name of the Lord!*

— John 12:13

Today marks the start of Great and Holy Week. Today shouts of joy are undergirded by our knowledge, as we look back across two millennia, of the somber events that immediately followed the triumph of Palm Sunday. For the celebration in Jerusalem is fleeting, and we read of it now with a mixture of joy and sorrow: joy because we understand that Christ deserves a reception like this, and more — and sorrow because we know that many will soon shout “Crucify Him!”

This week is the final stage in our Lenten journey, but not in our journey toward salvation. As we participate this week in Christ’s own final days, let us be reminded of what He gave on the Cross, of what He still gives in the Holy Eucharist: Himself. Fully God yet fully man, He tasted death so as to destroy it, and to give all of humanity hope in His Resurrection.

May we seek the Risen Christ, both at the end of this Holy Week and every day of our lives!

*O Lord our God,
teach us to emulate Christ's
example of self-emptying by
humbly offering compassionate
service in Your name.*

*“And the Word became flesh
and dwelt among us,
and we beheld His glory,
the glory as of the only
begotten of the Father,
full of grace and truth.”*

— John 1:14





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