

Reflections for
**GREAT
LENT**



INTERNATIONAL
ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN
CHARITIES

Reflections for the
JOURNEY
to
PASCHA



His Eminence Metropolitan Nicolae

Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas
*Liaison to IOCC from the Assembly of Canonical
Orthodox Bishops of the United States*

Our journey to Holy Pascha, through the preparation and discipline of Great Lent, offers an opportunity for reflection, renewal, and most of all repentance.

That we have this opportunity each year reflects the fundamental human need to constantly, deliberately return to communion with God. So often we separate ourselves from His love through our own failings. Repentance provides a path toward renewed communion, a way – through God’s grace – to return to Him. Perhaps at no time in the Church year do we feel the need for repentance more strongly than during Great Lent.

For in this season, the Church guides us to more focused prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, offering the tools for repentance. These disciplines ground us with humbling reminders that all we are and all we have come from Him, the Father of Lights.

As we do this work, relying on God’s great mercy, it may comfort us to remember that we walk among the communion of saints. We are not alone. In these pages, IOCC humbly offers encouragement for the Lenten path we all walk, with prayers that your soul may be refreshed in some small way.

It is my joy to invite you to once again begin the journey to Pascha, our Church’s greatest feast and our Lord’s greatest victory, the triumph over death. May we each reflect this great hope by serving others as Christ asks – because He loves us and gave Himself for us!



SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

Rev. Father Timothy Sawchak

Holy Trinity Church
Overland Park, KS

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." –GENESIS 1:26

On the Sunday of Orthodoxy, we celebrate the restoration of the Holy Icons. From Matins we hear: "O people of God, come and let us celebrate a day of joy; the heaven now makes glad, and earth with all the

hosts of angels and the companies of mortal men, each in their different orders, keeps the feast."

The week before the Sunday of Orthodoxy, we hear in the Gospel these words from the parable of the Last Judgment: "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Mt 25:40). By feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in strangers, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison – we are SERVING CHRIST BY SERVING OTHERS.

But, most importantly, on the Sunday of Orthodoxy we celebrate and confirm that we are all icons of God. We, created in the image and likeness of God, serve each other with love as Christ Himself loved each of us. Let us not relegate our understanding of icons to only the images in our homes and churches, but to our living and breathing neighbors.

SUNDAY OF ST. GREGORY PALAMAS

Danielle Xanthos, MA, MDiv

*We must pay closer attention
to what we have heard,
lest we drift away from it.*

— HEBREWS 2:1



On the second Sunday of Great Lent, we commemorate St. Gregory Palamas. Fittingly, in the day's Epistle, St. Paul reverberates prayerful words of the Psalms, reminding us to pay closer attention.

How do we pay closer attention to what we have heard? Typically, we seek quietude. At times, however, perhaps more often than not, it is difficult to find a time or place to be quietly still in this world. Stillness, as long as it is dependent upon the conditions outside of us, seems impossible. Thankfully, we have the example of the saints to better understand a stillness beyond the noise around us. Truly a guiding light of Orthodoxy and a messenger of grace, St. Gregory, as a teacher and defender of hesychasm, reminds us how to pay closer

attention by drawing upon words spoken long before his lifetime: "Be still," as God told Cain. Through prayerful stillness of the heart, we become attentive to what we have heard.

What have we heard is the Word of God. Certainly, we hear the Word through Scripture. Beyond that, however, the Word is God. Through prayerful stillness of the heart, we cultivate a living relationship with God—growing more perfectly united with God, and by virtue of this union, we unite with each other. Through prayerful stillness of the heart, our service to others becomes informed by Christ Himself. Regardless of the chaos around us, a soul that is prayerfully still will keep anchored to God, lest we drift away from Him.

VENERATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

Rev. Father John Salem

St. Elijah Antiochian Orthodox Church
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

The Lord said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

— MARK 8:34



On the third Sunday of Great Lent, Mark's Gospel reminds us that following Christ requires work. In this season, the Church offers fasting, prayer, and giving as part of this work. These disciplines are ways we can each follow Christ.

Commenting on another Lenten Gospel (Mt 6:1 ff.), read during Great Compline earlier in the fast, the Blessed Theophylact—11th and 12th century Archbishop of Bulgaria—suggests how we can achieve the goals set before us in a proper way.

Giving alms is a private discipline and calls for humility: "When you give alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does" (Mt 6:3). "The left hand," writes Theophylact, "represents vainglory and the right hand, almsgiving. Let not your vainglory be aware of your almsgiving."

Likewise, prayer is for personal spiritual growth, not display: "When you pray, enter into your inner chamber and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father Who is in secret" (Mt 6:6). "Should I not then pray in church?" asks the bishop. "Indeed I should, but with a right mind and not for show. It is not the place which harms prayer, but the manner and the intent with which we pray."

Finally, why do we pray? "Not to inform God of anything," Theophylact writes, "but instead, that we may detach ourselves from the cares of life and receive benefit by conversing with God."

This, in the end, is the aim of our Lenten disciplines and in part what it means to take up our cross. May we each earnestly, humbly seek our Lord this Lent.

SUNDAY OF ST. JOHN CLIMACUS

Rev. Father Gregory Hohnholt

Holy Trinity Cathedral | Carmel, Indiana

As ever-blooming fruits, you offer the teachings of your God-given book, O wise John, most blessed, while sweetening the hearts of all them that heed it with vigilance; for it is a ladder from the earth unto Heaven that confers glory on the souls that ascend it and honor you faithfully.

— KONTAKION OF ST. JOHN CLIMACUS



St. John Climacus entered the ascetic arena in his teenage years, struggled as a hermit for 40 years, and then became abbot of the monastery in Sinai. He wrote the Ladder of Divine Ascent in the sixth century.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent is most likely the foremost ascetical text in the Orthodox Church. We often think of the ascetical life as individual effort; an examination of conscience, a striving against the fallen passions, or sinful habits, to be formed more in the image of Christ. The ascetical life is often and rightly associated in our minds with the monastic life, though it is not the exclusive purview of monks and nuns, for all Christians are called to live the ascetical life.

And yet, one of the greatest ascetics of all time and the father of monastics, St. Anthony the Great, said, “Our life and death is with our neighbor.” The ascetical life, as given to us by St. John, is indeed focused on our interior struggle against the flesh, the world, and the devil. However, the ascetical life is not an end itself. The highest rung is love, and love primarily is about our neighbor. That is the end to which the ascetical life is given to us, so that we might overcome ourselves to better love God and our neighbor.

SUNDAY OF ST. MARY OF EGYPT

V. Rev. Father Miles Zdinak

Saints Peter & Paul Orthodox Church
Windber, Pennsylvania

*"But I have heard that God Who
was born of you became man on purpose
to call sinners to repentance."*

—The words of ST. MARY OF EGYPT
while standing outside the Church of the Holy Cross
before the icon of the Theotokos, unable to enter
because of her impure way of life



Our impure ways of life albeit by our words, our deeds, or our thoughts will always hinder us from approaching the all-loving and merciful God in one way or another. However, our Lord and Savior can lead us out of the impurity into all righteousness no matter what degree of impurity we have allowed into our life.

The Great Fast is our desert of purification, which can lead us out of sin into holiness. Just as the time St. Mary spent in the desert led her out of her sinful way of life to a life purified by God's indwelling in her, so too can our time spent in the Great Fast bring us to a purified life.

The first step for us toward purification

is the same as that of St. Mary: that is to confess we are sinners and are in need of repentance. We will never be able to be admitted into the Kingdom of God without admitting we need repentance.

The desert of the Great Fast offers us so many opportunities to repent and move closer to God: from the Great Canon to the weekly Presanctified Liturgies; from daily reflections and good works to our increased almsgiving; and from the sacred mysteries of Holy Confession and the Holy Eucharist. God has come into the world for the purpose of calling sinners to repentance. Let us answer that call and join the journey that leads to a purified life. May you have a blessed Pascha!



PALM SUNDAY

His Eminence Metropolitan Nicolae

Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas
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*Let us come with branches to praise Christ the
Master in faith like babies, purifying our souls
and crying to Him with a loud voice: Blessed
are You, O Savior.* –MATINS OF THE FEAST

In pronounced contrast to the conquerors of His earthly day, Christ enters the city not on a powerful war horse or at the head of an army but on a donkey. This must have seemed absurd to anyone looking for a king to defeat the Romans.

From His birth in a cave to His humiliating death on the cross, Christ's incarnation defies human expectations for His

Kingdom. It is established not through war but through love. Not through force but through humility. And we enter into it not through earthly power, success, or accomplishment but with the faith of a child.

On Palm Sunday we begin Holy Week, the final road to the Cross. Turning human paradigms on their head, Christ's humility from birth to death creates our greatest hope: a restoration of humanity's communion with God, a renewal of our true nature. Christ's humility renders death powerless and brings us home to Himself.

This Holy Week and beyond, may we imitate first the One who emptied Himself! May we find assurance in His victory over death, placing in Him the hope of our salvation!

Christ has risen from the dead. By death He has trampled upon death, and to those in the tombs He has given life! –Apolytikion of Pascha



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