

Reflections
FOR
GREAT
LENT

INTERNATIONAL
ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN
CHARITIES



IOCC®

International Orthodox Christian Charities

INTRODUCTION

HIS EMINENCE METROPOLITAN NICOLAE

The Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas

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

Once again, the season of Great and Holy Lent is upon us, and with its arrival, we hear anew the Church's call to repentance before our Creator. Through the preparation and discipline of this Great Fast, our Church invites us to nurture and to tend to our spiritual well-being by seeking ever-increasing communion with our good and loving God.

We give thanks to God for His mercy since in this season of repentance we are perhaps more deeply aware of our need for it. As we make the journey toward Pascha—that defining Christian feast and our hope of life everlasting—the Church “equips” us with the tools necessary for repentance.

The Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are ways of refocusing our hearts and minds on the eternal and for remembering that in this earthly life, our obedience to Christ is a way of working out our salvation. This life is an opportunity to grow in communion with the Triune God, and Great Lent is a special season in our lifelong journey: now, especially, but also in every season, we are called to serve one another, following the example of Christ Himself.

In the following pages, you will find reflections for this time of preparation written by IOCC



Frontliners, men and women trained to offer emotional and spiritual care in the wake of disasters across the US. Their service is part of IOCC's worldwide mission and represents a very human and personal aspect of the humanitarian work that we accomplish together. I pray that these perspectives will support your own Lenten journey during this year.

This Lent, may each of us find strength for the work Christ calls us to! May we rejoice in emptying ourselves for His sake, just as He emptied Himself for ours!



SUNDAY_{of} ORTHODOXY

**FR. CHRISTOPHER RETELAS,
PRESIDING PASTOR**

St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church
Anaheim, CA

*"Icons affirm a very ... fundamental truth
of Christianity: that is, the Incarnation
of Christ."*

Icons have been in use since the earliest days of the Church. In their simplest forms, icons were found in catacombs, graves, and other places of ancient Christian worship. They included the cross, the fish, the lamb, and other symbols that represented Jesus. By the fifth century, iconography began to be widespread. Beautiful paintings, mosaics, frescoes, and other media of art were used to depict Christ, the Theotokos, and the saints. The Church felt quite comfortable in depicting our Lord and His saints, as art was just another way to praise and teach about God, just as the Church used music and poetry.



Icons also affirm for us a very foundational and fundamental truth of Christianity: that is, the Incarnation of Christ, that God became man. The invisible became visible, the intangible became tangible, the unseen is now seen in the person of Jesus Christ.

This is the truth we proclaim today: that we can see God.


When a priest censes the church, he offers a blessing and prayer to the icons of the church, paying honor not to the painting, but to the saint. Then the priest censes the living icons throughout the church, you the faithful, because that's what you are, living icons of the beauty of God.

So on this Sunday of Orthodoxy, we celebrate the Triumph of Truth by remembering Who is Truth Incarnate—Jesus Christ.

May we all make His life and His way become our life and our way. Let us allow His Truth to be the guiding factor in our lives not only throughout our Great Lenten journey, but throughout every day of our lives.

To Him be all glory, honor, and worship, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY *of* ST. GREGORY PALAMAS



REV. GEORGE GARTELOS, PRIEST

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church
Tulsa, OK

*Prayer is a way to invite stillness
(and God) into our lives.*

We're still near the beginning of our Lenten journey, and St. Gregory Palamas reminds us how important it is to humble ourselves before God. Himself a monk of Mount Athos, Gregory was a great proponent of hesychasm, or contemplative prayer, as a way to draw near to an ineffable God.

During Great Lent, we perhaps seek quiet more (or more deliberately) than in other seasons. Of course, daily life does not stop, and we may struggle to carve out quiet moments amid the swirl of everyday activities. Prayer is a way to invite stillness (and God) into our lives, and when we do, He meets us where we are. As we hear in the Gospel lesson read on this second Lenten Sunday (Mark 2:1-12), "Christ was in the



house," which was full, and "they came bringing to Him a paralytic carried by four men." Like this paralyzed man, we need others to help bring or lead us to Christ. And other times, we need to be like one of the four men ... and carry others to Christ.

There are many blessings we receive as IOCC Frontliners, and one of the greatest and most humbling is when we are able to help lead people back toward Christ, symbolically carrying them when they are paralyzed spiritually as a result of the tragic loss they are going through. Please keep in your prayers all of our Frontliners, along with the brave first responders, and especially those we serve and minister to — that our efforts remain pure and lead others to Christ and His glory!

VENERATION *of the* HOLY CROSS

MARILYN N. BRADY, PHD

Holy Apostles Orthodox Church
Lansing, NY

*For behold, through the Cross,
joy has come into all the world.*



Participating fully in the Lenten disciplines is hard work! We get tired and hungry, and can get worn down by our efforts. So in the middle of the Fast, the Church sets before us the Cross of Christ, adorned with flowers and fragrant herbs. It seems strange that an instrument of torture and death is set there to encourage and strengthen us, but Christ in His great Love and compassion has made the instrument of death into a source of life.

There is much in the world today to wear us down. We don't need to travel to disaster sites to find opportunities to relieve suffering. Each of us, by paying attention to those we come in contact with, may find people who need a kind word, a helping hand, support and encouragement.

How do we find the strength to face struggles and losses, our own, and those of people we care for? We can look to the Cross as a symbol of victory over death, despair, and fear. Contemplating Christ's Cross can increase our own hope and faith in the power of God's love for all. Our strength comes through learning to trust in the Lord, and Him crucified, the One who granted paradise to the thief who reached out to Him as they both prepared to die.

Strengthened by this symbol of Christ's ultimate love, we can shoulder our own crosses, continue to learn self-denial through fasting, focus on the needs of others, and do good works of mercy as we find opportunities. Let us pray that the joy of Christ's victory through the Cross will strengthen and sustain us as we move through this suffering and needy world.



SUNDAY_{of} ST. JOHN CLIMACUS

VERY REVEREND
FATHER SERGE VESELINOVICH

St. George Serbian Orthodox Church
East Chicago, IN

"Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord by the practice of good deeds contrary to the sins." –ST. JOHN CLIMACUS

I think it's safe to say we've been living in pretty tough times recently. We need to be reminded of our faith to keep it strong, even more so when we face challenges as Orthodox Christians. Great Lent is a good time—maybe the best time—to remind ourselves and each other of all the gifts God provides.

One of those gifts is the example of the saints. St. John Climacus, or St. John of the Ladder,



had a vision of Christians making their way from earth up a ladder to Paradise. He saw their struggles on the way up, and he saw lots of them dragged down by temptation and sin. This metaphor is meant as a model for us. We get caught up in the swirl of everyday life, and climbing the ladder toward Christ isn't easy. Let's not lose sight of the wonderful saints and martyrs whose examples can inspire us and teach us.

As Orthodox Christians, we're called to witness for our faith. Sometimes we do that in works, sometimes in other ways. Repentance is hard, but it's how we come home to Christ. It's part of how we climb that ladder, and our works can reflect our repentance. Maybe we offer a listening ear; maybe we cook a meal or repair a home; maybe we pray for our enemies. Let's face it, maybe we can pray for our own family and friends who have fallen by the wayside either through our own fault or theirs. Never underestimate God's power. When we trust Him and ask Him, He shows us the way.

Let's encourage each other this Great Lent. Come, taste and see how good the Lord is. Amen.

SUNDAY_{of} ST. MARY_{of} EGYPT

MICHAELYN SLOAN, MSED,
RETIRED SOCIAL WORKER

St. Luke the Evangelist Orthodox Church
Palos Hills, IL

*The crowd pulled St. Mary toward
the church, resulting in ... self-examination
and repentance.*

St. Mary of Egypt's life testifies to our Lord's presence and power in our lives—even when we reject Him or do not know of Him.

Just as the crowd pulled St. Mary toward the church, resulting in her self-examination and repentance, we are often pulled into situations that offer us the same. We can walk away or renew our relationship with the living Christ. We have a choice. In the desert, Mary still struggled with temptations but was sustained by God's power.

As Frontliners, we are pulled into crowds—in homeless shelters, flooded or burned neighborhoods, parking lots, food lines—the results of disasters and tragedies. It is humbling and rewarding work. At times it is overwhelming.

During one deployment as a Frontliner, I found myself questioning whether I should be bringing emotional and spiritual support to others. I was tired. I was angry at the storm that resulted in so much misery. I felt unworthy to exemplify a life in Christ, most aware of my own sins. For me that day, repentance was about laying aside my needs, my weaknesses, confessing that I was an unworthy servant,



but by His grace, I would do what I had been trained to do.

That afternoon I encountered a woman whose husband had died months earlier, before the hurricane. Walking through the rubble of her home, she shared that she was a very private person and had never gotten involved in her neighborhood, despite living there for many years. "I just didn't care about others," she said matter-of-factly. "I just cared about myself and my family." After the storm, her neighbors, aware she was alone, came to help her first, despite their own needs.

Wiping aside tears and pointing toward the IOCC truck, she added, "And now you are here too, asking nothing of me but to help. My actions were so wrong, and I want to do right now. What can I do?"

"Find another in need, and do what you can for them," I responded.

Repentance takes us down different paths if we are willing. St. Mary of Egypt's path was into the desert. My path was to this woman. Her path remains unknown to me, but watching her walk away that day, I have a pretty good idea.



PALM SUNDAY

HIS EMINENCE
METROPOLITAN NICOLAE

The Romanian Orthodox Metropolia
of the Americas

*Now all things have been filled with light,
both heaven and earth and those beneath
the earth; so let all creation sing of
Christ's rising, by which it is established.*

— CANON OF PASCHA, troparion of the third ode

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, as we are approaching the end of our Lenten journey. This week, however, is a journey unto itself, seeing that in the Church services we participate in Christ's path to the Crucifixion and, ultimately, Resurrection.

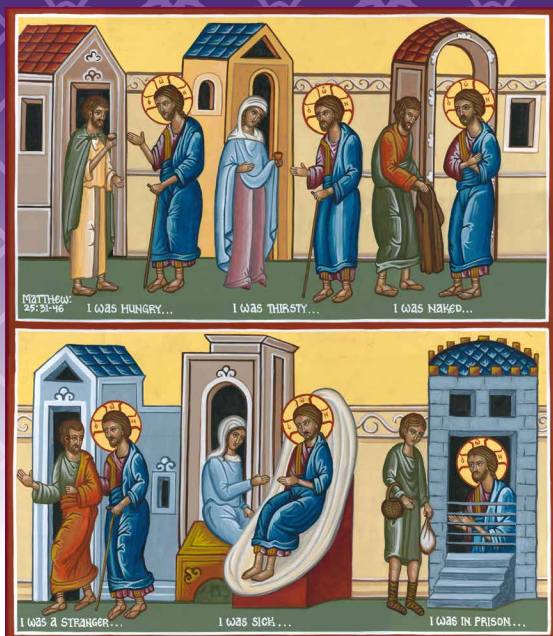
The week begins and ends with celebration, starting with the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and culminating with the triumph



over death. Between those two crucial moments, we see Christ blessing the bread and the wine with His disciples, entering the Garden of Gethsemane, struggling in prayer, and enduring unspeakable loneliness, betrayal, and death. Though He is sorely misunderstood by so many around Him, nevertheless, in every moment, Christ is giving us Himself; we witness this emptying in especially rich, deep ways during Great and Holy Week.

The grave cannot hold the Maker of the Universe, and He breaks its power. This is the great hope we hold before us now and always: the Cross of Christ—to the world, a symbol of humiliation—now transformed into the means and the sign of the greatest hope humanity has ever known. “Through the Cross, joy has come into all the world” (Prayer after Sunday Matins Gospel).

This Holy Week—but also in the days and weeks to come—let us remember Christ’s humility and seek to imitate Him. Let us pursue Him through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, for He has emptied Himself for our sake. Let us keep the Cross ever before us and rejoice together in His victory over death!



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without discrimination,
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Orthodox Church to so respond.*



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