

*Reflections*

FOR

# GREAT LENT



**IOCC**<sup>®</sup>

*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



Great and Holy Lent, though a somber season, is at the same time a journey toward the fullness of Life. It demonstrates our Eternal Father's patience and care for us—His wayward children—because He calls us each year patiently, lovingly back to Himself. Lent is an invitation to renewal as we seek deeper communion with Christ through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

The reflections in this booklet come from women volunteers who have served through IOCC. They have lifted up IOCC's work in their parishes and communities, have labored to tell others about IOCC, have led on Metropolitan Committees or IOCC's Board of Directors. Whether their work is behind the scenes or highly visible, their service reflects IOCC's mission to meet our neighbors' human needs in the spirit of Christ's love.

During Great Lent and every day of this earthly life, I pray that each of us may serve Christ in great and small ways, wherever we are in life. May we each give humbly and lovingly as He gives Himself for us. May we offer to His service all that we are!

*Lent is an invitation  
to renewal.*



# SUNDAY of ORTHODOXY

JASMINA THEODORE BOULANGER  
*IOCC Chairman of the Board*

St. Steven Serbian Orthodox Cathedral  
Alhambra, CA



Very often we hear the idea that when we help others we are “giving back,” that we are somehow paying the universe or society for things we have. This approach seems impersonal and transactional. It looks at giving as a zero-sum game in which we give because we have received and by giving back we may receive again. I think of giving differently.

When we give presents or help to our loved ones, the very act of giving and seeing their happy faces brings us happiness. Their smiles and the light

*Come, let us purify our souls  
with alms and mercy to the poor*

—SERVICE FOR THE EVENING  
OF THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

in their eyes fill our hearts and lighten our load. St. Maria of Paris reminds us that each person is the very icon of God incarnate. Thus, when we give or sacrifice for others, we are in essence venerating the Lord.

IOCC draws its inspiration from Matthew 25:35–36, 40, which begins, “For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in ... as you did it to one of the least of these, My brethren, you did it to Me.” These verses tell us that when we help others, we are giving a gift to our Lord. We give because it is pleasing to Him. And pleasing our Lord, our greatest Loved One, brings joy.

May your generous donations to IOCC in support of our work bring you joy.



# SUNDAY of ST. GREGORY PALAMAS

ELAINE G. CLADIS

IOCC Board Alum, Past Metropolitan  
Committee Chair

St. Catherine Greek Orthodox Church  
Greenwood Village, CO

*When we serve people in need, we point each other toward Christ.*



ST. GREGORY PALAMAS

The Gospel reading today shares the story of the paralytic whose friends carry him to Christ to be healed. This story is a beautiful example of how much we need each other. How we can help each other find our way. How when we serve people in need, we point each other toward our loving Lord.

We all have the chance to lovingly serve Christ by helping others. That is what IOCC exists to do. I'm truly honored and blessed to be part of this work, from sitting on IOCC's governing board to leading for many years our pan-Orthodox committee in Denver to organize IOCC fundraisers. When we work together, we can do so much.

Our Lenten practices are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and St. Gregory Palamas taught the practice of quiet prayer (*hesychasm*). When we are quiet, it is sometimes easier to hear the Lord's words, including His call to show our love for Him by meeting the human needs around us. When we actively seek ways to care for others, we will always find them.

I believe that offering practical help as the paralytic's friends did – perhaps it's clean water, perhaps a hot meal – brings us all closer to Christ. And that is our greatest goal, in Lent and always.

# SUNDAY *of the* VENERATION *of the* HOLY CROSS

**DONNA HADDAD CONOPEOTIS**  
*IOCC Board Alum, Past Metropolitan  
Committee Event Chair*

St. George Antiochian  
Orthodox Church  
Cicero, IL

St. Haralambos  
Greek Orthodox Church  
Niles, IL



When I think about Christian service, IOCC comes to mind immediately.

Over the years, I've had the honor of volunteering in several roles, each special to me in its own way. As a longtime board member, it was my privilege to visit programs overseas, including in Ethiopia, Greece, and Uganda. As part of the Chicago Metropolitan Committee, I've organized annual banquets, 5K walk-runs, and other events with our committed team to share IOCC's work here in Chicagoland.

I also serve as advisor to our parish youth, and it's such a joy to connect them with Christian service through IOCC. Most recently, after the terrible 2023 earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, our group made 500 hygiene kits for IOCC's kit program: it gave the teens the opportunity to have a direct

impact on people in need. Seeing them come together in the spirit of Christ's love inspired me.

This Sunday of the Holy Cross, could we each consider what service looks like for us in daily life—in what small (or large) ways we might take up our personal cross through service? For me, the cross of Christ is a powerful reminder of God's incomprehensible love. How can we give back to Him a portion of His generous gifts to us?

*In what ways might we  
take up our personal cross  
through service?*



# SUNDAY of ST. JOHN CLIMACUS

DR. PRESVYTERA ATHANASIA  
KOSTAKIS, DMIN, LMSW  
*IOCC Frontliner*

St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Church  
*New London, CT*

Have you ever realized that the commandment to love our neighbor is beyond our abilities? This is what the disciples learn when they fail to heal a possessed boy (Mark 9:17-29). Our Lord teaches them that some acts of love need deeper preparation.

On the fourth Sunday of Lent, the Church connects this gospel reading with St. John Climacus, a saint who wrote on acquiring holiness through humility and ascetical struggle. With this commemoration and gospel, the Church trains us to both love our neighbor in Christ and grow in our ability to share Christ's love.

Like the disciples in this gospel reading, we know we can't avoid serving our neighbor until we are holy enough. And yet, the weaknesses and limitations we face while serving our neighbor challenge us to turn to our Lord more fervently in prayer and fasting.

IOCC's US Action Teams give us an opportunity to enter this tension. Participants are trained to serve



*"Why could we not cast it out?"  
And he said to them, "This kind cannot  
be driven out by anything but prayer  
and fasting."*

—MARK 9:28-29

communities with dignity and humility during some of the most difficult points of their lives.

To love our neighbor well, we need continuous ascetical work and preparation. This will help us respond to our neighbor's needs effectively as faithful servants of the Lord.

# SUNDAY *of* ST. MARY *of* EGYPT

**MARGARET SCOTT**  
*IOCC Parish Representative*

St. Nicholas Orthodox Church  
*San Anselmo, CA*



On the fifth Sunday of our Lenten journey of repentance, we commemorate the life of St. Mary of Egypt. For 47 years, St. Mary withstood the loneliness, hunger, thirst, heat, and cold that accompanied her solitary journey in the desert wilderness. What a guide she is for us who strive to deny our flesh in order to care for our souls. And when after all those years she encountered the monk Father Zosimas, who had been sent by God to record her story, what did she ask? “But tell me first, Abba, how do the Christians live? How is the Church guided?”

After all those years alone, St. Mary’s first concern was for the Church. She, who through her ascetic efforts had entered into the realm of the angelic voices singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy” — she asked for the state of the Church, for our witness, for our presence in the world, just as our Lord and Savior asks. We may be grateful to IOCC that in answer to her question, we may reply, “The Orthodox Christians do live as Christ taught us to live — loving and caring for those in need.”

*In you, O Mother, was preserved with exactness what was according to the image; for you took up the Cross and followed Christ. By so doing, you taught us to disregard the flesh, for it passes away; but to care for the soul, since it is immortal. Therefore, O Venerable Mary, your spirit rejoices with the Angels.*

—TROPARION OF THE SAINT

The pan-Orthodox work of IOCC provides a compassionate and universal presence in the world, relieving suffering whenever and wherever it exists; not only through its emergency responses but in offering sustainable solutions. By God’s grace, IOCC leads us to a future in which all human beings may, as IOCC’s vision says, “have means to live with dignity, respect, and hope.”



# PALM SUNDAY

## HIS EMINENCE METROPOLITAN NICOLAE

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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

During His life on this earth, our Lord and Savior rarely did or said what others expected of Him, and He certainly did not fulfill His people's expectations for a Messiah.

From His birth in a cave to His humiliating death on the cross, Christ shapes a new vision for the Kingdom of Heaven: it is manifest not through force but through love and humility. This unexpected King kneels to wash His disciples' dusty feet and invites us to follow Him with the faith of a child. He invites us to love and serve as He did.

Palm Sunday begins the final road to the Cross. This week we see Him offer Himself, even unto death. How unthinkable, that the Creator of the cosmos would permit His creatures to take His life! Yet Christ's humility renders death powerless, so now we may return to loving communion with Him. We complete our earthly journey with the hope of abundant, eternal life in Our Father's house.

As we view the Cross before us this Holy Week, let us remember how Christ emptied Himself for our sake. Let us seek ways to imitate Him in loving service wherever we have the opportunity. And let us find in His Cross the light and life of the resurrection—for this is our great hope!

*Your tomb, O Christ, the fountain of  
our resurrection, has been revealed as  
life-bearing, more radiant than paradise  
and fairer than any royal palace.*

—COMPLINE OF HOLY PASCHA





*IOCC, in the spirit of Christ's love, offers emergency relief and development programs to those in need worldwide, without discrimination, and strengthens the capacity of the Orthodox Church to so respond.*



**IOCC**<sup>®</sup>

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