



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF NEW JERSEY

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΝΕΑΣ ΙΕΡΣΕΗΣ

Holy and Great Lent 2019

The Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy

Honorable Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Esteemed Members of the Metropolitan Council, Esteemed Members of the Parish Councils, Philoptochos Sisterhood, Faculty and Students of the Catechetical and Greek Afternoon Schools, Directors and Participants of all Youth Organizations, and all devout Orthodox Christians of the Greek Orthodox Communities of our Holy Metropolis of New Jersey

My Beloved in the Lord,

With the commencement of Great Lent we begin our journey to Holy Week wherein we commemorate the entry of our Lord into Jerusalem, the institution of the Eucharist, our Lord's betrayal, His Passion, His death on the Cross, and, ultimately, His Resurrection from the dead on the third day. For us to approach the most holy feast of Pascha, we must properly prepare ourselves throughout this Lenten journey so that we may participate in the feast with a pure heart. This journey is long and difficult struggle and it begins with us in utter darkness since it reflects the seemingly hopeless state of humanity. Our pilgrimage from darkness to light during Holy and Great Lent is similar to humanity's journey throughout the ages. Having disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, our ancestors found themselves closed outside the gates of Paradise and confronted with their new state of being. They found themselves in a land of darkness; a land where they encountered loneliness for the first time as they were distanced from their Creator; a land where pain was a new sensation to them; a land where they became acquainted with the feeling of fear. Though Adam and Eve would use their free will to disobey their Creator, God would ensure that humanity had a way to return to him utilizing the same free will that cost them their freedom. It would be many generations before the time was ripe for our Lord to reveal Himself in the flesh and to present this opportunity for us to reverse the curse of darkness so that we may return to His Divine Light.

It is precisely this journey of humanity from darkness to light that we relive during the course of Great Lent. This journey towards the Light of the Resurrection requires us to prepare through prayer, forgiveness, fasting, and almsgiving and it gives us increased opportunities to exercise our freedom in a manner that is directed not towards ourselves, but towards God and our neighbor. During this period of Great Lent we see more Divine Services such as Pre-Sanctified Liturgies, Great and Small Compline, and the Akathist Services. Even though few people are able to make all of these services, challenge yourself to go to Church more than you already do. Challenge yourself to pray more and to truly listen to the words of the hymns. Challenge yourself to increase your personal prayer life so that you build a relationship with God and with the Saints. Forgiveness is also a hallmark of the Lenten period. It is necessary to ask forgiveness from God and from your neighbor. Therefore, if you have not been to confession in a while or even if you have never gone to confession, schedule a time to meet with your parish priest so you may confess your sins to God and so that your parish priest may help give you pastoral guidance. Seek forgiveness from your neighbor and ask forgiveness from those who love you and from those who do not. In this way, we learn humility so that we may honestly implore "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*" (Ps. 50:10).

Fasting is an important part of this Lenten journey not because we deprive ourselves, but because we learn to control our free will. Fasting is not just abstaining from food, but also controlling what comes out of our mouths like scornful words, curses, or exhibiting temper. When fasting from certain foods, however, challenge yourself to do more than you have done before within reason. The object of fasting is not self-mortification, but it is meant to display that we are not merely body, we are also soul and that there is more to us than just our physical bodies, there is also a spirit that has been given free will. Finally, the act of giving to the poor or donating our time to helping others highlights the fundamental aspect of not living for ourselves, but living for Christ since each of our neighbors are made in the image and likeness of our Lord. Push yourselves to give more to those who are less fortunate or to give your time to those who are the marginalized members of our society. If you know a lonely person, spend some time with them and bring them greater joy. Spend additional time with someone in the hospital who may not get many visitors. Invite someone who may be estranged from the Church to your local parish. These small acts are seeds that are nurtured and cared for over time and which tend to bear the sweetest fruits in the Lord's vineyard.

My beloved children in the Lord, we must not approach Holy and Great Lent as an obligation to be fulfilled, but as a relationship with God and neighbor to be repaired and restored. The purpose of this journey is not to check off a series of boxes in an effort to momentarily complete a task, but its purpose is to engender in us a true metanoia wherein we turn back to God and continually orient ourselves towards Him. Furthermore, we should not look at Great Lent as a mere reenactment of our Lord's Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, but we approach this feast as active participants of this reality through the Divine Services as we hear repeated during the Bridegroom services of Holy Week, *"Come, then, and with our minds now purified, let us also go with Him and be crucified with Him and die for Him to the pleasures of this life, so that we may also live with Him..."*

It is my most fervent hope and prayer that as we begin this period of Holy and Great Lent that we actively participate in prayer, forgiveness, fasting, and almsgiving. Finally, I pray we all remained focused on permanently orienting ourselves towards God as we prepare ourselves to fully participate in His glorious three-day Resurrection.

With Paternal Love and Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Metropolitan Evangelos". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The word "Metropolitan" is written in a larger, more prominent script, and "Evangelos" is written in a smaller, more delicate script to its right. The signature is centered on the page.

† E V A N G E L O S
Metropolitan of New Jersey