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ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR THE GREAT FAST 2023

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There are three things which most belong to religious actions, namely prayer, fasting and almsgiving, in the exercising of which while every time is accepted, or that ought to be more zealously observed, which we have received as hallowed by tradition from the Apostles ... for by prayer we seek to propitiate God, by fasting we extinguish the lusts of the flesh, by alms we redeem our sins, and at the same time God's image is throughout renewed in us ... Because in prayer faith remains steadfast, in fasting life remains innocent, in almsgiving the mind remains kind." (St. Leo the Great, *On the Fast of the Tenth Month*, 4).

Beloved Members of our Diocesan Family:
Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!

Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving are the three defining practices of the Orthodox Christian way of life in general, and our Church's discipline of Great Lent in particular. Great Lent is the school of our Orthodox Church. Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving are the disciplines of a healthy spiritual life taught and encouraged during the Lenten Season.

Our Lord Himself lists these three practices in His Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:1-18), and they are mentioned throughout Scripture either individually or in combination: "This kind [of evil] can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting" (Mk. 9:29).

Prayer is, first and always, *prayer of the heart*, "in the secret place" (Matt. 6:6). The first rule of prayer is a pure heart – a good conscience being cleansed in repentance, faith and love. Within a pure heart, we should build a habit of praying the prescribed daily prayers (the Trisagion Prayers, specific Psalms and prayers from our prayerbook), as well as personal requests directly to God. Likewise, we should attend weekly public worship – Vespers and Sunday Divine Liturgy, Vigil and feast day Liturgies. In the Great Fast we should attend the Lenten Services, especially the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy ... and frequently unite ourselves to Christ through the Mysteries of Confession and Holy Communion.

Fasting is abstinence from all or certain kinds of food and drink for a specific period of time. The purpose of fasting is to curb the desires of the flesh, beginning with the stomach, so as to prevent over-indulgence not only in food and drink, but in all the desires of the flesh. Fasting humbles the flesh before the spirit, and frees the flesh to pursue more important spiritual desires. During Lent we fast from all flesh meats and dairy products because Our Lord offered His flesh and blood on the Cross out of His love for us, that we might have eternal life with Him.

Without neglecting these first two pillars of the spiritual life, I wish to focus this year's Lenten efforts on the giving of alms. Almsgiving is an English translation of the Greek word meaning "mercy." The definition of almsgiving is mercifulness, specifically acts of mercy or charitable deeds, given to the poor and needy. Our Lord Himself instructs us in the Gospel: "Be merciful as your Father in Heaven is merciful" (Lk. 6:38).

As the Church prepared us for the journey of the Great Fast, we were taught on the Sunday of the Last Judgment, that it is not enough just to desire to see Jesus (as Zacchaeus did), not enough simply to see ourselves as we really are (as the publican did), and not enough even to come home to God (as the prodigal did). We must also, like Christ, be God's sons and daughters by following the way of His Only-Begotten Son, by seeing Our Lord in every human being and by serving Him through them.

We must see Christ in our grandparent suffering from Alzheimer's disease or cancer, and even though it is so difficult to watch, we must spend time with them, telling and showing them that we love them by helping to care for them. We must recognize Our Lord in the elderly neighbor on the block who needs help with their yard or needs someone simply to check on them. We are to see Christ in the parishioner who can no longer drive to church, because of age or illness – we should pick them up and bring them to divine services or visit them each Sunday and share the Scripture readings and pray with them, bring them a prosphora and read them the bulletin. Finally – and perhaps this is the most difficult – we must see in the homeless beggar on the streets of our city Christ Himself, and offer that person the money they need for food, or provide them a hot meal or warm clothing.

Almsgiving requires that we lay aside funds for other persons in need; Lent is a perfect time to do this, because we have the extra funds we are saving by not going “out to dinner,” not eating steak or cheesecake. Alms take the forms of various basic needs: food, clothing and/or money. We must give alms without judging the person receiving them. And we must give alms “in secret” (Mt. 6:4), that is without others knowing that we are giving and without any anticipation of recognition. We must simply do this because we see in such persons Christ Himself in need – as He said, “Whatever you do for the least of My brethren, you do it for Me” (Mt. 25:40). The venerable martyr Saint Maria Skobtsova (Mother Maria of Paris), whose convent was an open door for the refugee, the needy and the lonely in the 1930's and 40's (until her martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis in 1945), said about the meaning of Almsgiving:

“The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead, I shall be asked: did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says 'I' ... 'I was hungry and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.'” Saint Maria continues with this striking statement:

JESUS = those in need

“To think that He puts an equal sign between Himself and anyone in need ... I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated to my sinews. It fills me with awe.”

My sincere prayer is that this year's Lenten journey will be one in which all of us express our love for, draw closer to, and become more like our Savior – by seeing in every human being the Image of Christ and serving Him through those who are in need. May this road of salvation lead us to Holy Pascha and a joyous celebration of the Resurrection of the One Who loves us more than we love ourselves, the very Son of God!

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing, and my sincere love,

+ Archbishop Michael

Archbishop of New York and the Diocese of New York and New Jersey