

# SOBORNOST

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*American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese*

*ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE  
OF CONSTANTINOPLE*

## SERVICES

**Wednesdays in Great Lent: Liturgy of  
Presanctified Gifts 7:00 PM**

**Friday: Moleben to the Cross 6:00 AM**

**Saturday: Confession 5:00 PM**

**Great Vespers 5:30 PM**

**Sunday: Matins (Orthros) 8:45 AM**

**Sunday School 9:30 AM | Divine Liturgy 10:00 AM**

## **March 17, 2019 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Great Lent (Sunday of Orthodoxy) | Blessed Alexis, Man of God**

Saint Alexis was born at Rome into the family of the pious and poverty-loving Euphemianus and Aglais. The couple was childless for a long time and constantly prayed the Lord to grant them a child. And the Lord consoled the couple with the birth of their son Alexis.

At six years of age the child began to read and successfully studied the mundane sciences, but it was with particular diligence that he read Holy Scripture. When he was a young man, he began to imitate his parents: he fasted strictly, distributed alms and beneath his fine clothing he secretly wore a hair shirt. Early on there burned within him the desire to leave the world and serve God. His parents, however, had arranged for Alexis to marry a beautiful and virtuous bride.

On his wedding night, Alexis gave her his ring and his belt (which were very valuable) and said, "Keep these things, Beloved, and may the Lord be with us until His grace provides us with something better." Secretly leaving his home, he boarded a ship sailing for Mesopotamia. Arriving in the city of Edessa, where the Icon of the Lord "Not-made-by-Hands" (August 16) was preserved, Alexis sold



everything that he had, distributed the money to the poor and began to live near the church of the Most Holy Theotokos under a portico. The saint used a portion of the alms he received to buy bread and water, and he distributed the rest to the aged and infirm. Each Sunday he received the Holy Mysteries.

The parents sought the missing Alexis everywhere, but without success. The servants sent by Euphemianus also arrived in Edessa, but they did not recognize the beggar sitting at the portico as their master. His body was withered by fasting, his comeliness vanished, his stature diminished. The saint recognized them and gave thanks to the Lord that he received alms from his own servants. The inconsolable mother of Saint Alexis confined herself in her room, incessantly praying for her son. His wife also grieved with her in-laws.

Saint Alexis dwelt in Edessa for seventeen years. Once, the Mother of God spoke to the sacristan of the church where the saint lived: "Lead into My church that Man of God, worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. His prayer rises up to God like fragrant incense, and the Holy Spirit rests upon him." The sacristan began to search for such a man, but was not able to find him for a long time. Then he prayed to the Most Holy Theotokos, beseeching Her to clear up his confusion. Again a voice from the icon proclaimed that the Man of God was the beggar who sat in the church portico.

The sacristan found Saint Alexis and brought him into the church. Many recognized him and began to praise him. The saint secretly boarded a ship bound for Cilicia, intending to visit the church of Saint Paul in Tarsus. But God ordained otherwise. A storm took the ship far to the West and it reached the coast of Italy. The saint journeyed to Rome and decided to live in his own house. Unrecognized, he humbly asked his father's permission to settle in some corner of his courtyard. Euphemianus settled Alexis in a specially constructed cell and gave orders to feed him from his table.

Living at his parental home, the saint continued to fast and he spent day and night at prayer. He humbly endured insults and jeering from the servants of his father. The cell of Alexis was opposite his wife's windows, and the ascetic suffered grievously when he heard her weeping. Only his immeasurable love for God helped the saint endure this torment. Saint Alexis dwelt at the house of his parents for seventeen years and the Lord revealed to him the day of his death. Then the saint, taking paper and ink, wrote certain things that only his wife and parents would know. He also asked them to forgive him for the pain he had caused them.

On the day of Saint Alexis' death in 411, Archbishop Innocent (402-417) was serving Liturgy in the presence of the emperor Honorius (395-423). During the services a Voice was heard from the altar: "Come unto Me, all ye who labor and

are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt.11:28). All those present fell to the ground in terror. be The Voice continued: “On Friday morning the Man of God comes forth from the body; have him pray for the city, that you may remain untroubled.” They began to search throughout Rome, but they did not find the saint. Thursday evening the Pope was serving Vigil in the Church of Saint Peter. He asked the Lord to show them where to find the Man of God.

After Liturgy the Voice was heard again in the temple: “Seek the Man of God in the house of Euphemianus.” All hastened there, but the saint was already dead. His face shone like the face of an angel, and his hand clasped the paper, and they were unable to take it. They placed the saint’s body on a cot, covered with costly coverings. The Pope and the Emperor bent their knees and turned to the saint, as to one yet alive, asking him to open his hand. And the saint heard their prayer. When the letter was read, the righteous one’s wife and parents tearfully venerated his holy relics.

The body of the saint was placed in the center of the city. The emperor and the Pope carried the body of the saint into the church, where it remained for a whole week, and then was placed in a marble crypt. A fragrant myrrh began to flow from the holy relics, bestowing healing upon the sick. The venerable relics of Saint Alexis, the Man of God, were buried in the church of Saint Boniface. The relics were uncovered in the year 1216. (*from oca.org*)

### **Today’s Epistle Lesson – St. Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews 11:24-26, 30-12:2**

Brethren, by faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he looked to the reward. And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided

something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

### **Today's Gospel Lesson – Saint John 1:43-51**

At that time, Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, "Follow Me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." And Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!" Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered and said to Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And He said to him, "Amen, amen, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

## *A Word From the Holy Fathers*

This Sunday, Brethren, begins the week of Orthodoxy, or the week of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, because it is today that the Holy Orthodox Church solemnly recalls its victory over the Iconoclast heresy and other heresies and gratefully remembers all who fought for the Orthodox faith in word, writing, teaching, suffering, or godly living. Keeping the day of Orthodoxy, Orthodox people ought to remember it is their sacred duty to stand firm in their Orthodox faith and carefully to keep it.

For us it is a precious treasure: in it we were born and raised; all the important events of our life are related to it, and it is ever ready to give us its help and blessing in all our needs and good undertakings, however unimportant they may seem. It supplies us with strength, good cheer and consolation, it heals, purifies and saves us. The Orthodox faith is also dear to us because it is the Faith of our Fathers. For its sake the Apostles bore pain and labored; martyrs and preachers suffered for it; champions, who were like unto the saints, shed their tears and their blood; pastors and teachers fought for it; and our ancestors stood for it, whose legacy it was that to us it should be dearer than the pupil of our eyes.

And as to us, their descendants – do we preserve the Orthodox faith, do we keep to its Gospels? Of yore, the prophet Elijah, this great worker for the glory of God, complained that the Sons of Israel have abandoned the Testament of the Lord, leaning away from it towards the gods of the heathen. Yet the Lord revealed to His prophet, that amongst the Israelites there still were seven thousand people who have not knelt before Baal (3 Kings 19 LXX). Likewise, no doubt, in our days also there are some true followers of Christ. ‘The Lord knows those who are His’ (2 Tim 2:19).

We do occasionally meet sons of the Church, who are obedient to Her decrees, who honor their spiritual pastors, love the Church of God and the beauty of its exterior, who are eager to attend to its Divine Service and to lead a good life, who recognize their human failings and sincerely repent of their sins. But are there many such among us? Are there not more people, ‘in whom the weeds of vanity and passion allow but little fruit to the influence of the Gospel, or even in whom it is altogether fruitless, who resist the truth of the Gospel, because of the increase of their sins, who renounce the gift of the Lord and repudiate the Grace of God’?

‘I have given birth to sons and have glorified them, yet they deny Me,’ said the Lord in the olden days concerning Israel. And today also there are many who were born, raised and glorified by the Lord in the Orthodox faith, yet who deny their faith, pay no attention to the teachings of the Church, do not keep its injunctions, do not listen to their spiritual pastors and remain cold towards the divine service and the Church of God.

How speedily some of us lose the Orthodox faith in this country of many creeds and tribes! They begin their apostasy with things, which in their eyes have but little importance. They judge it is ‘old fashioned’ and ‘not accepted amongst educated people’ to observe all such customs as: praying before and after meals, or even morning and night, to wear a cross, to keep icons in their houses and to keep church holidays and fast days. They even do not stop at this, but go further: they seldom go to church and sometimes not at all, as a man has to have some rest on a Sunday (...in a saloon); they do not go to confession, they dispense with church marriage and delay baptizing their children. And in this way their ties with Orthodox faith are broken! They remember the Church on their deathbed, and some don’t even do that! To excuse their apostasy they naively say: ‘This is not the old country, this is America, and consequently it is impossible to observe all the demands of the Church.’ As if the word of Christ is of use for the old country only and not for the whole world. As if the Orthodox faith is not the foundation of the world!

‘Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil doers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel into anger.’ (Is 1:4) If you do not preserve the Orthodox faith and the commandments of God, the least you can do is not to humiliate your hearts by inventing false excuses for your sins! If you do not honor our customs, the least you can do is not to laugh at things you do not know or understand. If you do not accept the motherly care of the Holy Orthodox Church, the least you can do is to confess you act wrongly, that you are sinning against the Church and behave like children! If you do, the Orthodox Church may forgive you, like a loving mother, your coldness and slights, and will receive you back into her embrace, as if you were erring children.

Holding to the Orthodox faith, as to something holy, loving it with all their hearts and prizing it above all, Orthodox people ought, moreover, to endeavor to spread it amongst people of other creeds. Christ the Savior has said that ‘neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candle stick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house’ (Mt 5.15). The light of Orthodoxy was not lit to shine only on a small number of men. The Orthodox Church is universal; it remembers the words of its Founder: ‘Go ye into the world, and preach the gospel to every creature’ (Lk 16.15), ‘go ye therefore and teach all nations’ (Mt 28.19). We ought to share our spiritual wealth, our truth, light and joy with others, who are deprived of these blessings, but often are seeking them and thirsting for them.

Once ‘a vision appeared to Paul in the night, there stood a man from Macedonia and prayed him, saying, come over into Macedonia, and help us’ (Acts 16.9), after which the apostle started for this country to preach Christ. We also hear a similar inviting voice. We live surrounded by people of alien creeds; in the sea of other religions, our Church is a small island of salvation, towards which swim some of the people, plunged in the sea of life. ‘Come, hurry, help,’ we sometimes hear from the heathen of far Alaska, and oftener from those who are our brothers in blood and once were our brothers in faith also, the Uniates... And are we to remain deaf and insensible? God save us from such a lack of sympathy. Otherwise woe unto us, ‘for we have taken away the key of knowledge, we entered not in ourselves, and them that were entering in we hindered’ (Lk 11.52). But who is to work for the spread of the Orthodox faith, for the increase of the children of the Orthodox Church? Pastors and missionaries, you answer. You are right; but are they to be alone? St. Paul wisely compares the Church of Christ to a body, and the life of a body is shared by all the members. So it ought to be in the life of the Church also. ‘The whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love’ (Eph 4.16).

At the beginning, not only pastors alone suffered for the faith of Christ, but lay people also, men, women and even children. Heresies were fought against by lay people as well. Likewise, the spread of Christ's faith ought to be near and precious to the heart of every Christian. In this work every member of the Church ought to take a lively and heart-felt interest. This interest may show itself in personal preaching of the Gospel of Christ..... Needless to say, it is not everybody among us who has the opportunity or the faculty to preach the gospel personally. And in view of this I shall indicate to you, Brethren, what every man can do for the spread of Orthodoxy and what he ought to do. The Apostolic Epistles often disclose the fact, that when the Apostles went to distant places to preach, the faithful often helped them with their prayers and their offerings. Saint Paul sought this help of the Christians especially.

Consequently we can express the interests we take in the cause of the Gospel in praying to the Lord, that He should take this holy cause under His protection, that He should give its servants the strength to do their work worthily, that He should help them to conquer difficulties and dangers, which are part of the work, that He should not allow them to grow depressed or weaken in their zeal; that He should open the hearts of the unbelieving for the hearing and acceptance of the Gospel of Christ, that He should impart to them the word of truth, that He should unite them to the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; that He should confirm, increase and pacify His Church, keeping it forever invincible: we pray for all this, but mostly with lips and but seldom with the heart.

Don't we often hear such remarks as these: 'What is the use of these special prayers for the newly initiated? They do not exist in our time, except, perhaps, in the out of the way places of America and Asia; let them pray for such where there are any; as to our country such prayers only needlessly prolong the service which is not short by any means, as it is.' Woe to our lack of wisdom! Woe to our carelessness and idleness! Offering earnest prayers for the successful preaching of Christ, we can also show our interest by helping it materially. It was so in the primitive Church, and the Apostles lovingly accepted material help to the cause of the preaching, seeing in it an expression of Christian love and zeal.

In our days, these offerings are especially needed, because for the lack of them the work often comes to a dead stop. For the lack of them preachers cannot be sent out, or supported, churches cannot be built or schools founded, the needy amongst the newly converted cannot be helped. All this needs money and members of other religions always find a way of supplying it.

Perhaps, you will say, that these people are richer than ourselves. This is true enough, but great means are accumulated by small, and if everybody amongst us

gave what he could towards this purpose, we also could raise considerable means. Accordingly, do not be ashamed of the smallness of your offering. If you have much, offer all you can, but do offer, do not lose the chance of helping the cause of the conversion of your neighbors to Christ, because by so doing, in the words of St. James, ‘you shall save your own soul from death and shall hide a multitude of sins’ (Jas 5.19-20). Orthodox people! In celebrating the day of Orthodoxy, you must devote yourselves to the Orthodox faith not in word or tongue only, but in deed and in truth.

– St. Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow, Sermon on the Sunday of Orthodoxy (*delivered while he was bishop in America – Ed.*) (from <http://tokandylaki.blogspot.com>)

## *The True Nature of Fasting*

[Continued from last week: this material is taken from the introduction to The Lenten Triodion published by St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press – ed.]

When we hear the Triodion speak of almsgiving, the word should almost always be taken in the sense that it means to give not only our money but our time, not only what we *have* but what we *are*; it is to give a part of ourselves. For the mere giving of money can often be a substitute and an evasion, a way of protecting ourselves from closer personal involvement with those in distress. On the other hand, to do nothing more than offer reassuring words of advice to someone crushed by urgent material anxieties is equally an evasion of our responsibilities (James 2:16). Bearing in mind the unity already emphasized between man’s body and his soul, we seek to offer help on both the material and the spiritual levels at once. ‘When you see the naked, cover him; and hide not yourself from your own flesh.’ The liturgical tradition treats Isaiah 58:3-8 as a basic Lenten text. So we read in the Triodion:

While fasting with the body, brethren, let us also fast in spirit. / Let us loose every bond of iniquity; / Let us undo the knots of every contract made by violence; / let us tear up all unjust agreements; / let us give bread to the hungry / and welcome to our house the poor who have no roof to cover them, / that we may receive great mercy from Christ our God (*Vespers for Wednesday of the first week*).

Always in our acts of abstinence we should keep in mind St. Paul’s admonition not to condemn others who fast less strictly: ‘Let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats’ (Rom 14:3). Equally, we remember Christ’s condemnation of outward display in prayer, fasting or almsgiving (Matt. 6:1-18). Both these Scriptural passages are often recalled in the Triodion:



Consider well, my soul: do you fast? / Then despise not your neighbor. / Do you abstain from food? / Condemn not your brother. (*Matins for the Sunday of the Last Judgment*)

Come, let us cleanse ourselves by almsgiving and acts of mercy to the poor, / Not sounding a trumpet or making a show of our charity. / Let not our left hand know what our right hand is doing; / Let not vainglory scatter the fruit of our almsgiving; / But in secret let us call on Him who knows all secrets: / Father, forgive us our trespasses, for You love mankind. (*Vespers for Sunday evening – Sunday of Orthodoxy*).

If we are to understand correctly the text of the Triodion and the spirituality that underlies it, there are five misconceptions about the Lenten fast against which we should guard. In the first place, the Lenten fast is not intended only for monks and nuns, but is *enjoined on the whole Christian people*. Nowhere do the Canons of the Ecumenical or Local Councils suggest that fasting is only for monks and not for the laity. By virtue of their Baptism, all Christians - whether married or under monastic vows - are Cross-bearers, following the same spiritual path. The exterior conditions in which they live out their Christianity display a wide variety, but in its inward essence the life is one. Just as the monk by his voluntary self-denial is seeking to affirm the intrinsic goodness and beauty of God's creation, so also is each married Christian required to be in some measure an ascetic. The way of negation and the way of affirmation are interdependent, and every Christian is called to follow both ways at once.

In the second place, the Triodion *should not be misconstrued in a Pelagian sense*. If the Lenten texts are continually urging us to greater personal efforts, this should not be taken as implying that our progress depends solely upon the exertion of our own will. On the contrary, whatever we achieve in the Lenten fast is to be regarded as a free gift of grace from God. The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete leaves no doubt at all on this point: "I have no tears, no repentance, no compunction; But as God, O Saviour, bestow them on me."

In the third place, our fasting *should not be self-willed but obedient*. When we fast, we should not try to invent special rules for ourselves, but we should follow as faithfully as possible the accepted pattern set before us by Holy Tradition. This accepted pattern, expressing as it does the collective conscience of the People of God, possesses a hidden wisdom and balance not to be found in ingenious austerities devised by our own fantasy. Where it seems that the traditional regulations are not applicable to our personal situation, we should seek the counsel of our spiritual father - not in order legalistically to secure a 'dispensation' from him, but in order humbly with his help to discover what is the will of God for us.

Above all, if we desire for ourselves not some relaxation but some piece of additional strictness, we should not embark upon it without our spiritual father's blessing. Such has been the practice since the early centuries of the Church's life:

Abba Antony said: 'I know of monks who fell after much labor and lapsed into madness, because they trusted in their own work and neglected the commandment that says: "Ask your father, and he will tell you."' (Deut. 32: 7) Again he said: 'So far as possible, for every step that a monk takes, for every drop of water that he drinks in his cell, he should consult the *gerontes* [*elder – Ed.*], in case he makes some mistake in this.' (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*)

These words apply not only to monks but also to lay people living in the 'world', even though the latter may be bound by a less strict obedience to their spiritual father. If proud and willful, our fasting assumes a diabolical character, bringing us closer not to God but to Satan. Because fasting renders us sensitive to the realities of the spiritual world, it can be dangerously ambivalent: for there are evil spirits as well as good.

In the fourth place, paradoxical though it may seem, the period of Lent is a time *not of gloom but of joyfulness*. It is true that fasting brings us to repentance and to grief for sin, but this penitent grief, in the vivid phrase of St. John Climacus, is a 'joy-creating sorrow'. The Triodion deliberately mentions both tears and gladness in a single sentence:

Grant me tears falling as the rain from heaven, O Christ, / As I keep this joyful day of the Fast. (*Vespers for Monday in the first week*)

It is remarkable how frequently the themes of joy and light recur in the texts for the first day of Lent:

With joy let us enter upon the beginning of the Fast. / Let us not be of sad countenance.../ Let us joyfully begin the all-hallowed season of abstinence; / And let us shine with the bright radiance of the holy commandments. . ./ All mortal life is but one day, so it is said, / To those who labor with love. / There are forty days in the Fast; / Let us keep them all with joy. (*Matins, Monday in the first week*)

The season of Lent, it should be noted, falls not in midwinter when the countryside is frozen and dead, but in spring when all things are returning to life. The English word 'Lent' originally had the meaning 'springtime'; and in a text of fundamental importance the Triodion likewise describes the Great Fast as 'springtime':

The springtime of the Fast has dawned, / The flower of repentance has begun to open. / O brethren, let us cleanse ourselves from all impurity / And sing to

the Giver of Light: / Glory be to You, who alone loves mankind. (*Vespers, Wednesday in Cheesefare Week*)

Lent signifies not winter but spring, not darkness but light, not death but renewed vitality. Certainly it has its somber aspect, with the repeated prostrations at the weekday services, with the dark vestments of the priest, with the hymns sung to a subdued chant, full of compunction. In the Christian Empire of Byzantium theatres were closed and public spectacles forbidden during Lent; (St. Photius, *Nomocanon*; Might not this rule be applied by contemporary Orthodox to television?) and even today weddings are forbidden in the seven weeks of the fast. Yet these elements of austerity should not blind us to the fact that the fast is not a burden, not a punishment, but a gift of God's grace:

Come, O people, and today let us accept / The grace of the Fast as a gift from God. (*Matins, Monday in the first week*)

Fifthly and finally, our Lenten abstinence *does not imply a rejection of God's creation*. As St. Paul insists, 'Nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom. 14: 14). All that God has made is 'very good' (Gen. I: 31): to fast is not to deny this intrinsic goodness but to reaffirm it. 'To the pure all things are pure' (Titus I: 15), and so at the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom of heaven there will be no need for fasting and ascetic self-denial. But, living as we do in a fallen world, and suffering as we do from the consequences of sin, both original and personal, we are not pure; and so we have need of fasting. Evil resides not in created things as such but in our attitude towards them, that is, in our will. The purpose of fasting, then, is not to repudiate the divine creation but to cleanse our will. During the fast we deny our bodily impulses - for example, our spontaneous appetite for food and drink - not because these impulses are in themselves evil, but because they have been disordered by sin and require to be purified through self-discipline. In this way, asceticism is a fight not against but for the body; the aim of fasting is to purge the body from alien defilement and to render it spiritual. By rejecting what is sinful in our will, we do not destroy the God-created body but restore it to its true balance and freedom. In Father Sergei Bulgakov's phrase, we kill the flesh in order to acquire a body.

But in rendering the body spiritual, we do not thereby dematerialize it, depriving it of its character as a physical entity. The 'spiritual' is not to be equated with the non-material, neither is the 'fleshly' or carnal to be equated with the bodily. In St. Paul's usage, 'flesh' denotes the totality of man, soul and body together, in so far as he is fallen and separated from God; and in the same way 'spirit' denotes the totality of man, soul and body together, in so far as he is redeemed and divinized by grace. Thus the soul as well as the body can become carnal and fleshly, and the

body as well as the soul can become spiritual. When St. Paul enumerates the 'works of the flesh' (Gal. 5: 19-21), he includes such things as sedition, heresy and envy, which involve the soul much more than the body. In making our body spiritual, then, the Lenten fast does not suppress the physical aspect of our human nature, but makes our materiality once more as God intended it to be.

Such is the way in which we interpret our abstinence from food. Bread and wine and the other fruits of the earth are gifts from God, of which we partake with reverence and thanksgiving. If Orthodox Christians abstain from eating meat at certain times, or in some cases continually, this does not mean that the Orthodox Church is on principle vegetarian and considers meat-eating to be a sin; and if we abstain sometimes from wine, this does not mean that we uphold teetotalism. When we fast, this is not because we regard the act of eating as shameful, but in order to make our eating spiritual, sacramental and eucharistic - no longer a concession to greed but a means of communion with God the giver. So far from making us look on food as a defilement, fasting has exactly the opposite effect. Only those who have learnt to control their appetites through abstinence can appreciate the full glory and beauty of what God has given to us. To one who has eaten nothing for twenty-four hours, an olive can seem full of nourishment. A slice of plain cheese or a hard boiled egg never taste so good as on Easter morning, after seven weeks of fasting.

We can apply this approach also to the question of abstinence from sexual relations. It has long been the Church's teaching that during seasons of fasting married couples should try to live as brother and sister, but this does not at all signify that sexual relations within marriage are in themselves sinful. On the contrary, the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete - in which, more than anywhere else in the Triodion, we find summed up the significance of Lent states without the least ambiguity:

Marriage is honorable, and the marriage-bed undefiled. / For on both Christ has given His blessing, / Eating in the flesh at the wedding in Cana, / Turning water into wine and revealing His first miracle.

The abstinence of married couples, then, has as its aim not the suppression but the purification of sexuality. Such abstinence, practiced 'with mutual consent for a time', has always the positive aim, 'that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer' (1 Cor. 7: 5). Self restraint, so far from indicating a dualist depreciation of the body, serves on the contrary to confer upon the sexual side of marriage a spiritual dimension which might otherwise be absent.

To guard against a dualist misinterpretation of the fast, the Triodion speaks repeatedly about the inherent goodness of the material creation. In the last of the

services that it contains, Vespers for Holy Saturday, the sequence of fifteen Old Testament Lessons opens with the first words of Genesis, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth... : all created things are God's handiwork and as such are 'very good'. Every part of this divine creation, so the Triodion insists, joins in giving praise to the Maker:

The hosts of heaven give Him glory; / Before Him tremble cherubim and seraphim; / Let everything that has breath and all creation / Praise Him, bless Him, and exalt Him above all forever. (*Great Canon, Canticle 8, Irmos*)

You who covers Your high places with the waters, / Who sets the sand as a bound to the sea and upholds all things: / The sun sings Your praises, the moon gives You glory, / Every creature offers a hymn to You, His Author and Creator, forever. (*Compline, Holy Thursday*)

Let all the trees of the forest dance and sing. . . . Let the mountains and all the hills Break forth into great rejoicing at the mercy of God, And let the trees of the forest clap their hands. (*Matins, Palm Sunday*)

This affirmative attitude towards the material world is founded not only on the doctrine of creation but also on the doctrine of Christ. Again and again in the Triodion, the true physical reality of Christ's human nature is underlined. How, then, can the human body be evil, if God Himself has in His own person assumed and divinized the body? As we state at Matins on the first Sunday in Lent, the Sunday of Orthodoxy:

You have not appeared to us, O loving Lord, merely in outward semblance, / As say the followers of Mani, who are enemies of God, / But in the full and true reality of the flesh.

Because Christ took a true material body, so the hymns for the Sunday of Orthodoxy make clear, it is possible and, indeed, essential to depict His person in the holy icons, using material wood and paint:

The uncircumscribed Word of the Father became circumscribed, / Taking flesh from you, O Theotokos, / And He has restored the sullied image to its ancient glory, / Filling it with the divine beauty. / This our salvation we confess in deed and word, / And we depict it in the holy icons. (*Kontakion for the Sunday of Orthodoxy*)

This assertion of the spirit-bearing potentialities of the material creation is a constant theme during the season of Lent. On the first Sunday of the Great Fast, we are reminded of the physical nature of Christ's Incarnation, of the material reality of the holy icons, and of the visible, aesthetic beauty of the Church. On the second Sunday we keep the memory of St. Gregory Palamas, who taught that all

creation is permeated by the energies of God, and that even in the present life this divine glory can be perceived through man's physical eyes, provided that his body has been rendered spiritual by God's grace. On the third Sunday we venerate the material wood of the Cross; on the sixth Sunday we bless material branches of palms; on Wednesday in Holy Week we are signed with material oil in the sacrament of Anointing; on Holy Thursday we recall how at the Last Supper Christ blessed material bread and wine, transforming them into His Body and Blood.

Those who fast, so far from repudiating material things, are on the contrary assisting in their redemption. They are fulfilling the vocation assigned to the 'sons of God' by St. Paul: 'The created universe waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... The creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now' (Rom. 8:19-22). By means of our Lenten abstinence, we seek with God's help to exercise this calling as priests of the creation, restoring all things to their primal splendor. Ascetic self-discipline, then, signifies a rejection of the world, only in so far as it is corrupted by the fall; of the body, only in so far as it is dominated by sinful passions. Lust excludes love: so long as we lust after other persons or other things, we cannot truly love them. By delivering us from lust, the fast renders us capable of genuine love. No longer ruled by the selfish desire to grasp and to exploit, we begin to see the world with the eyes of Adam in Paradise. Self-denial is the path that leads to our self-affirmation, our means of entry into the cosmic liturgy whereby all things visible and invisible ascribe glory to their Creator.

### **Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers**

Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers will be held at Sts. Peter and Paul Antiochian Orthodox Church at 10620 River Road, Potomac, MD 20854 on Sunday March 17 at 5pm. Guest speaker will be Fr. Nicholas Belcher, of the Antiochian Archdiocese.

### **Social Team for March 24**

Team 3 is up next week – Edgington, Chopak, Barzykin, Moore. Don't forget!

### **Church Work Day Scheduled**

We are planning to do some yard work, cleaning and organizing in the church and house on April 20 after Divine Liturgy. All are invited and welcome to join in on the fellowship.

## Follow Our Diocese On-Line

**Diocesan Website:** <http://www.acrod.org>

**Camp Nazareth:** <http://www.campnazareth.org>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/acroddiocese>

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***In Your Prayers – Please Remember...*** His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, His Eminence Metropolitan GREGORY, Fr. Joseph & Family, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi of Aleppo, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of Aleppo, His Grace Bishop Neofitos of Nyeri and Mt. Kenya, Fr. John & Pani Betty Jean Baranik, Presbytera Katie Baker and family, Santiago Alzugaray, Jeffrey Carey, Tatyana and Slava Chumak & family, Xenia Chilkowich, Jon Church, Ramius Connour, Curtis Cooper, Luke Cooper, Tina Crull, Mary Diane David, Ron Dominiecki, Linda A. Georgiev, Heather Himler, John Homick, Cameron Houk, Helen Janowiak, John M. Janowiak, Tucker Karl and family, Robert & Pam Karpin, Andrew Kinn, Kopan family, Brian, Helen, and Luke Mahony, Valentina Makowelski, Susan Matula, Anna Meinhold, Dn. Henry Middleton, David & Kathryn Newman, Bobby Nutter & Family, Henry & Lisa Osborne, Westin Perry & Parents, John Reece, Mary Reed, Chris & Kaitlin Rixey, Jerry Von Ronne, Anne Rosario, James, Theodore and Christina Ristas, Samson Family, Sharon Sheptak, Alexander Shostko, Bernie Takabayashi & family, Dawn & Faith Ulmschneider, Lydia Vita, Christine, Marshall, Nathaniel, Subdcn. Nectarios and Ia, the Syrian Christians displaced by war, Mother Virginia Marie and the Carmelite Nuns of Port Tobacco, and all those in need of our prayers. (Please advise Fr. Joseph of changes.)