

SOBORNOST

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American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese

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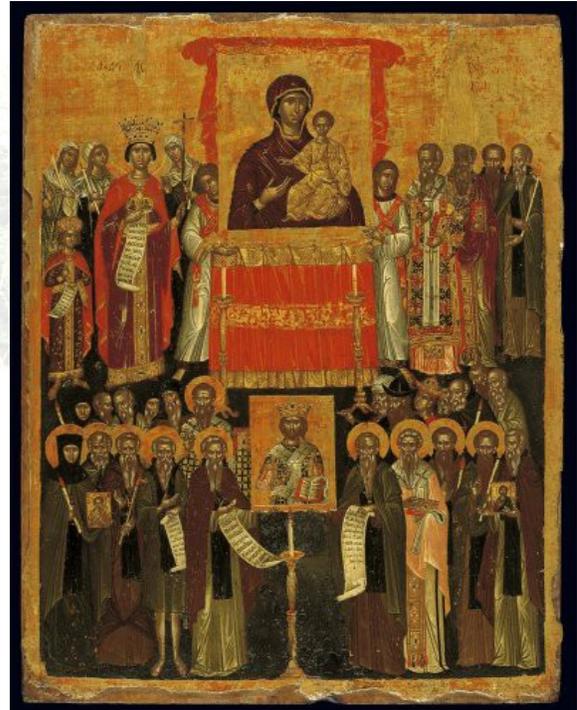
Wednesday in Great Lent: Liturgy of
Presanctified Gifts 6:00 PM

Friday: Moleben to the Cross 6:00 AM

Saturday: Great Vespers 5:00 PM

Sunday: Matins (Orthros) 8:45 AM

Divine Liturgy 10:00 AM



***Please note that attendance is currently limited by restrictions dictated by local response to the COVID-19 pandemic; if you are currently not assigned to an attendance group, please contact**

outreach@apostlethomas.org for information on when you may attend.

March 21, 2021 | Sunday of Orthodoxy (1st Sunday in Lent)

The First Sunday in Great Lent Prior to the 9th Century

The first Sunday of Great Lent, since the 9th century, has been called the "Sunday of Orthodoxy". This is due to the fact that on the first Sunday of Great Lent in the year 843, (a purely historical coincidence, having little to do with our journey to Pascha per se) the icons, frescoes, mosaics and other liturgical graphic art as well as relics were restored to the churches after nearly 95 years of iconoclasm between 730 and 843 (there was a respite of about 25 years in the middle).

Prior to the ninth century, Great Lent was primarily used for catechesis, especially for the preparation of catechumens for baptism. The Sundays of Great Lent would present themes for their education and benefit and these themes were reflected through the Epistle and Gospel readings of the day.[1] The first Sunday commemorated the Prophets, especially Moses, Aaron and Samuel; on this day, the catechumen would learn how the Prophets foreshadowed the coming of Christ.

Today, the Divine Liturgy contains elements of this tradition, especially in the readings chosen for the day: both the Epistle and the Gospel suggest that Christians, now living in the time when the words of the Prophets have been fulfilled, have access to greater things than the Prophets could ever have imagined. After speaking of the faith and sacrifices of the Old Testament Righteous, the author of Hebrews concludes: "And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39-40).

The Alleluia verses are then chanted in Tone 4 (from Psalms 99:6; 34:17): "Moses and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among them that call upon His Name." "They called upon the Lord, and He hearkened unto them." The Gospel makes this real clear: it presents Jesus as the expectation of the Prophets, the long-awaited Messiah.

At the deepest level, the focus of Great Lent was (and should still be) the catechetical preparation of the catechumen for the Paschal Mystery of Baptism. Thus, the first and essential theme of the first Sunday of Great Lent is the proclamation that New Life in Christ comes after a long period of preparation. The Epistle and Gospel reading for Liturgy that day affirms - even promises - that the catechumens who are preparing themselves for Baptism at Pascha will behold great things: they will lay aside the Old Creation and embrace the New Creation; they will leave behind the Old Aeon and enter into the New Aeon; they will give up the temporal kingdom of this world, replacing it with the eternal Kingdom which the Old Testament Righteous, by faith, experienced only as a foreshadowing. The catechumens (and all the faithful) will experience these not in shadow but in truth. We are surrounded by the "cloud of witnesses" who urge us to throw off everything that clings to us and weighs us down. We will see the heavens open up and we will behold the Lord Jesus.

Now that most Orthodox Christians are baptized as infants, and Christianity has entered the mainstream, the time of Great Lent means something else. Certainly the educational practice remains – it is, of course, always helpful to remind ourselves of the truths of our faith, because each time we encounter it, the more it penetrates our lives. But the themes have changed, now emphasizing different aspects of the Christian faith - as we find, for example, with the first Sunday of the Great Fast. Now the theme is the Sunday of Orthodoxy, and it celebrates the restoration of the icons in Hagia Sophia on February 19, 842, issued by the Synod of Constantinople on that date, which went on to declare that every First Sunday of Lent this event was to be remembered. It was seen as the triumph of the true faith over heresy, because the veneration of images was not only allowed, but proclaimed, and those who wanted to explain why the practice is in accord with the

Christian faith could do so without without fear of persecution. The veneration of the images became, itself, an image of Orthodoxy, for orthopraxis and orthodoxy are intricately linked: when one is rejected it entails a rejection of the other. The practice of forbidding the depiction and veneration of icons was fueled by non-Orthodox Christology and Soteriology. Rather, it sponsored a gnostic understanding, not only of the incarnation, but of the Christian life, because, by its dictates, the physical could no longer be seen as united with the spiritual.

No one could describe the Word of the Father; but when he took flesh from you, O Theotokos, He accepted to be described, and restored the fallen image to its former beauty. We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images. (Kontakion, Sunday of Orthodoxy) (*from johnsanidopoulos.com*)

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

Brethren and fathers, since every beginning is difficult, the first fruits of the fast corresponding to the change of diet and of works of zeal produce a certain difficulty and roughness; but with persistence and practice it is soothed and softened; this is why it is written, "No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of justice to those who have been trained by it."

And so let us too, who have been allowed to traverse the first week of the fast, become more enthusiastic for the future through experience, knowing that enthusiasm strengthens both soul and body, making what is heavy light and what is difficult easy. The opposite is true: idleness makes what is light heavy and what is easy difficult. However let us not strive beyond our power in our works of zeal, but with our spiritual father keep a watch over our bodily health also. For what use is there in walking too hard from the start and falling down more quickly, rather than attentively keeping in view the extent of the dwelling. But since the day with exertion is accustomed to produce despondency, let us sustain the soul with good pursuits and spiritual thoughts, not with those of a worldly sort, in which are emptiness, confusion, wretchedness and bitterness, but in ones in which are sweetness and joy. "I remembered God," it says, "and I was glad." Our mind then should be on God, on heavenly sights, on the beauties of Paradise, on the everlasting dwellings, on the regime there, where the souls of the just and of

sinners are now, on how the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ will be, "in which", according to the sacred saying, "the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up"; then how each soul is going to take again its yoke-fellow the body, what a gathering that will be of every human from Adam to the final consummation, how great and fearful and more dazzling than the rays of the sun will be the face of Christ, what his voice that we shall hear, and last, what will be the final state of the just who are admitted into the kingdom of heaven and of the sinners who are sent away to eternal punishments.

These, brethren, are the things that we should be caring about and thinking about, with which we should be occupied, since we live out of the world, and since we have our home in heaven and our lives have nothing in common with those who live according to the world; with these it is possible to be moved to compunction, to weep and to be enlightened, both to lead a life of peace here and to have hope of attaining the eternal good things to come, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and might, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and always and to the ages of ages. Amen.

– St. Theodore the Studite

Also Commemorated Today: St. James the Confessor

Regarding the life of Saint James, we have incomplete information. Neither the place of his birth nor the place where James served as Bishop are known. We know that from the time of his youth he was inclined toward the ascetic life, and he purified himself through fasting and prayer. Due to his great virtue he was elected Bishop.

On behalf of his veneration of the holy icons, the blessed one endured many trials and exiles at the hands of the iconoclasts. Having endured these trials bravely, including hunger and thirst, he delivered his soul into the hands of God, and from Him received the unfading crown of confession.

Some sources indicate that he was persecuted during the reign of Constantine Copronymos (741-775), while others believe he was a monk at Stoudios Monastery and a disciple of Saint Theodore the Studite (759-826) before becoming a Bishop. It is further believed this may be the James to which Saint Theodore the Studite dedicated a homily (PG 99, 1353-1356) and says that he died as a Confessor in 818, though he does not refer to him as a Bishop. (*from johnsanidopoulos.com*)

St. Serapion, Bishop of Thmuis

The surname of "the Scholastic", which was given him, is a proof of the reputation which he acquired, by his penetrating genius, and by his extensive learning, both sacred and secular. He presided some time in the catechetical school of Alexandria, but, to apply himself more perfectly to the science of the saints, to which he had always consecrated himself, his studies, and his other actions, he retired into the desert, and became a bright light in the monastic state.

St. Athanasius assures us in his *Life of Saint Anthony*, that in the visits which Serapion paid to that illustrious patriarch, St. Anthony often told on his mountain, things which passed in Egypt at a distance; and that at his death, he left him one of his tunics of hair.

St. Serapion was drawn out of his retreat, to be placed in the episcopal see of Thmuis, a famous city of Lower Egypt, near Diospolis, to which Stephanus and Ptolemy give the title of a metropolis. The name in the Egyptian tongue signified a goat, which animal was anciently worshipped there, as St. Jerome informs us.

St. Serapion was closely linked with St. Athanasius in the defense of the Christian faith - for which he was banished by the Emperor Constantius; whence St. Jerome styles him a Confessor.

Certain persons, who confessed God, the Son consubstantial to the Father, denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This error was no sooner broached, but our Saint strenuously opposed it, and informed St. Athanasius of this new inconsistent blasphemy; and that zealous defender of the adorable mystery of the Trinity, the fundamental article of the Christian faith, wrote against this rising monster. The four letters which St. Athanasius wrote to Serapion, in 359, out of the desert, in which at that time he lay concealed, were the first express confutation of the Macedonian heresy that was published.

St. Serapion ceased not to employ his labors to great advantage, against both the Arians and Macedonians. He also compiled an excellent book against the Manicheans, in which he shows that our bodies may be made the instruments of good, and that our souls may be perverted by sin; that there is no creature of which a good use may not be made; and that both just and wicked men are often changed, the former by falling into sin, the latter by becoming virtuous. It is, therefore, a self-contradiction to pretend with the Manicheans that our souls are the work of God, but our bodies of the devil, or the evil principle.

St. Serapion wrote several learned letters, and a treatise on the *Titles of the Psalms*, quoted by St. Jerome, which are now lost. At his request, St. Athanasius composed several of his works against the Arians; and so great was his opinion of our Saint, that he desired him to correct, or add to them what he thought wanting.

Socrates relates that St. Serapion gave an abstract of his own life, and an abridged rule of Christian perfection in very few words, which he would often repeat, saying: “The mind is purified by spiritual knowledge, (or by holy meditation and prayer,) the spiritual passions of the soul by charity, and the irregular appetites by abstinence and penance.” This Saint died in his banishment in the fourth age, and is commemorated on this day in the Roman Martyrology. (*from johnsanidopoulos.com*)

Preparing for Confession

What is sin? The Greek word for sin, hamartia, means “to miss the mark.” As Christians, our “mark” or the “target” for which we “aim” is a Christ-like life, lived to the best of our ability according to the teachings, precepts, and commandments of God. When we miss this mark or fail to hit this target, we sin.

Murder is a sin. Pride and envy are sins. Stealing a car is a sin. Stealing a candy bar is a sin. Refusing to attend the Liturgy is a sin—but so is attending the Liturgy with hatred for others. Missing the mark is missing the mark. If we aim at the bullseye and miss, it makes no difference if it is by an inch or a yard. In both cases, we have failed to achieve our goal.

There are many ways to prepare for confession. Often, a person will spend time in contemplation of the sins they know, perhaps working to make a list of them, and also spend some time praying to be shown those sins they don’t see -- for we all sin in ways we don’t even realize.

You can find different lists of sins and writings to help you think of the various kinds of sin you might consider repenting and confessing. Some are based on the Seven Major Sins (Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony Avarice, Sloth), some are based on Ten Commandments or on other Scriptural readings, and some are just lists of sins known to be common. The goal is to help you examine your own heart, and to find those sins that you need to bring to your confession.

Fr. Thomas Hopko of blessed memory wrote a beautiful self-examination based on The Beatitudes. The questions are offered as a general indication of what our approach should be.

Self-Examination Based on The Beatitudes (*St. Matthew 5:3-12*)

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Am I poor before God and men? Do I cultivate the attitude of poverty? Do I realize that all is God's and from God? Do I use my life and everything I have as that which belongs to God? Do I share the goods of the earth with others, knowing that all is God's? Do I take my opinions and ideas from God? Do I acknowledge my spiritual and intellectual poverty before God, accepting his wisdom and truth? Am

I possessive, selfish, self-satisfied, self-righteous, self-seeking? Am I an idolater of my own opinions, ideas, possessions? Do I lust after status, power, authority, wealth, position? Do I really love and value poverty as the perfect ideal?

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Am I a person who mourns? Do I lament over the suffering of men? Do I weep over the troubles in Church and state, family and society? Do I suffer with all who suffer, in poverty and squalor, in misery and sin? Do I weep over sickness, disease, tragedy, and death? Or do I simply "take it as it is", passing off as courage what is really hard-heartedness and lack of sympathetic concern? Do I have compassion on the lowly, the lustful, the addicted, the selfish, the wretched, the evil and sinful of the world without judgment or condemnation? Am I sad over the sins and of others? Or do I, in fact, laugh and gloat and mock the faults of others, and take perverse pleasure in those things about which true Christians, in imitation of Christ, can only mourn?

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Am I meek with the meekness of Jesus? Am I meek in the sense that I only fight evil with good? Do I accept and practice the fact that humble love and truth and courage in goodness is the only weapon available in any battle with sin and sinful people? Do I lord it over others, at home, at work, at church? Do I love and actually use force, brute command, blind authority, intimidation, coercion, to accomplish my will? Do I bless those who curse me, pray for those who abuse me, do good to those who hate me, serve those who misuse me, speak to those who shun me? Do I love my enemies and forgive my offenders? Do I believe in the method of the meekness of Christ as the only way for genuine achievement?

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Do I hunger and thirst for God? Do I desire to be righteous? Do I work to be holy? Do I read or study or make any continued effort for love and for truth, for the Spirit of God? Do I pray? Do I fast? Do I read the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Fathers, the lives of the Saints, and other spiritually profitable works? Do I do any "spiritual exercises" which train me in goodness? Do I come to Church? Do I participate in the Mysteries? Do I go out of my way to help, to teach, to serve in some way? Do I do the things which I know bring righteousness?

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Do I show mercy to others? Do I forgive those who offend me? Do I try to understand those who are different? Do I take pleasure in judging and condemning? Do I talk about others? Do I revel in gossip? Do I say things, though possibly true, which need not be said but only can harm? Do I rejoice in wrong? Am I legalistic, loving the law more than the Spirit? Do I cover offenses, or do I

stir things up by picking and condemning? Am I petty and small? Do I slander and shame? Am I prejudiced, making judgments and coming to conclusions without proper facts but with pre-formed opinions? Do I actually prefer strict judgment to tender mercy?

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Do I love purity, cleanness, and wholeness? Am I polluted by filthy thoughts and words and actions? Is my mind stained by demonic rationalizations and prejudices? Or am I pure in my openness to all that is good? Is my body corrupted by beastly sensuality and lust? Are my thoughts and deeds pure, or are there always hidden motives and intentions? Am I trusting and trustful, with a singleness of purpose and total integrity in everything? Or do I connive and deceive, cheat and lie? Am I hypocritical and pretentious? Am I caught by some passion: eating, drinking, smoking, working, playing, sleeping, or something else which has more control over me than I have over it? Is there any darkness or impurity which blinds me and holds me from freedom and wholeness with God?

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the sons of God.

Do I love and make peace? At home, at work, at church, in society, and the whole world? Am I angry and impatient? Do I look for fights and arguments? Do I provoke others to anger? Do I believe in turning the other cheek? Or do I take refuge in physical force? Do I love violence? Do I worship aggression and power? Do I seek inner peace and quiet which is the basic condition for peace in the world?

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for their is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Am I ever persecuted for what is right? Am I ready to be? Am I ready to give my life, without vengeance, for what is true? Do I participate in good activities which may bring criticism from others? Or do I take the easy road of non-involvement in human affairs, in family or job or churchroad of non-involvement in human affairs, in family or job or church or society at large? Do I go along with things which are wrong from fear or cowardice or laziness? Do I flee responsibility? Do I worship security? Am I defending my own small life in contradiction to the righteousness of God? Am I, in fact, ashamed of Christ?

Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Is my joy and gladness in God? Or Is it In this world with its passions, powers, possessions, and praise? Am I mean and grouchy or jealous and moody? Am I despairing and without hope? Am I pessimistic and anxious? Do I complain and

spread darkness and irritation to others? Is my faith of no consequence in my actions and attitudes to the events of life? Do I really consider the lilies of the field and trust in God and rejoice in this trust? Is my treasure in God or in myself? Is my life hid with Christ in God, or am I, in fact, a man of this age in body, mind, and spirit? Do I believe and have in truth the “joy of believing”? -- Fr. Thomas Hopko, *If We Confess Our Sins*, Department of Religious Education, The Orthodox Church In America, 1975.)

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