CHALLENGE

THE PULSE OF ORTHODOX YOUTH

Great and Holy Lent

Spiritual Training for the Biggest Event of Our Lives

by Eva Kokkinos

"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

On Feb. 5, two NFL teams finally met in Indianapolis, IN for the biggest game of their careers… The Super Bowl.

So, for the New York Giants and the New England Patriots, this game would be the place where all of the training, discipline, and determination would be necessary to achieve their ultimate goal. Only one team could be awarded the Lombardi trophy and be named the Super Bowl Champions. This year, the New York Giants prevailed.

On April 15, 2012, Orthodox Christians throughout the world will attend the most important event of the liturgical year… the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! In preparation for that day, each Orthodox Christian must train in spiritual disciplines to be ready for Pascha.

More importantly, this spiritual discipline and training is really preparation for eternal life!

So how does an Orthodox Christian begin this spiritual discipline? During Great Lent, how do we become Champions in Christ?

1) Champions in Fasting

Don't be fooled by the commercials and endorsements. You won't find a professional athlete eating fast food or a buffet of desserts when preparing for a big game.

Instead, athletes who want to succeed make sure to discipline themselves from certain foods, certain drinks, and even certain activities. Athletes train their minds and bodies to be in the peak condition to achieve their goals. For the Orthodox Christian, fasting is a difficult but necessary tradition of the Orthodox Church.

Fasting is a way for us to discipline and prepare ourselves to receive our Lord through the Sacrament of Eucharist. In addition, fasting involves more than just abstaining from certain foods.

We also discipline our eyes, ears, minds, and mouths by fasting from actions that do not help us grow closer to God. We have to always keep in mind the goal of our Christian lives and to prepare daily.

2) Champions in Charity

Have you ever seen two players collide on the football field or the basketball court, leaving one on the ground? Isn't it great when you see a player from the opposite team help the down player get back onto their feet again? Playing on different teams does not mean they are from different planets and courtesy does not apply. It is an incredibly noble gesture for one to offer their hand to another and lift them up when they are down.

During this Lenten season, charity plays an enormous role in our transformation. Sometimes we will encounter those who are in trouble, those who have collided with disaster, poverty, disease, or misfortune. God calls each of us to extend our hand to those who are down spiritually, emotionally, socially, and even financially and help them get back on their feet.

As Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke, "for whatever you do for the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me."

Most importantly, take a look at the icon of the Resurrection of our Lord. Jesus endured the ultimate battle against evil, conquering death by death.

Even Jesus extended His hands to both Adam and Eve, pulling them from Hades. Shouldn't we do the same for all those who we see that need a "helping hand?"

3) Champions in Humility

Isn't it interesting that the NFL gives a penalty when someone spends too much time showing off in the end-zone? There is nothing wrong with being happy or enthusiastic about a great play.

But unsportsmanlike conduct is not tolerated. A true champion is one who is confident, but humble. Humble and truly professional athletes remember that game is more important than ego.

Look at the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee in the Gospel of Luke (18:10-14). When the Pharisee prayed, he did not simply pray. Instead, he went on and on about how good he was… especially compared to the Publican. But the Publican, a tax collector, humbly asked God to forgive him. No trash talk, no boastful talk, no aggression toward the Pharisee who was judging him. So what was the result? Jesus said, *"Those who exalt themselves shall be humbled, and those who humble themselves shall be exalted."*

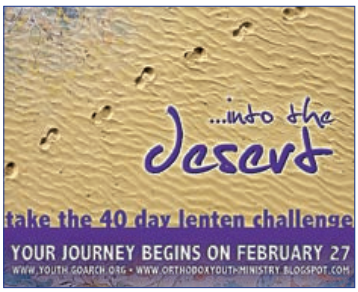
4) Champions in Love

In time, the trophies, MVP awards, signing contracts, or bonuses all expire or tarnish and fade. But those athletes who had positive attitudes, played fairly, and who spent their time helping others are the ones who leave a lasting impression on sports fans. For Christians, the same is true.

St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 says, *"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I become as a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal… love never fails."*

We can offer someone a smile when they are having a really rough day. We might offer a kind word when a friend is being bullied or criticized. We can have lunch with someone who is sitting alone.

These small gestures "never fail" to leave a more lasting and meaningful impression on those around us. In turn, we will receive that "imperishable crown" when we make an effort to live a life in Christ.



Must – have Items for Great Lent

Whether you are a teen or an adult, Great Lent can be a challenging part of the Christian journey. With the right tools and resources, Lent can really be a special time where our faith and our commitment to Christ are deepened! Here are a few "must-have" items to help get on the right track:

1) **Orthodox Study Bible** – Pick up your Orthodox Study Bible, visit www.goarch.org for the reading of the day, and commit specific time to reading the Holy Scriptures. You can also get the Daily Readings on your smartphone with the Daily Readings app! Don't have a Bible? Go to your local parish bookstore or visit your favorite online Orthodox bookstore to purchase a copy.

2) **Orthodox Prayer Book** – During the Lenten season, we have an opportunity to more deeply focus on our prayer life. But we don't always know how to pray or what to say. There are wonderful Orthodox prayer books that you can take with you wherever you go… school, work, camp, etc. Go to your local parish bookstore to find a copy. You can also find Orthodox Christian prayers on many church websites. You can download a copy and keep it at you nightstand or with your icons.

3) **Parish Calendar of Lenten Services** –Great Lent is filled with beautiful service to attend. Make sure you have a copy of your parish's Lenten services. Some parishes even have them posted online or available in an e-Newsletter. Attending Lenten services might encourage you to attend more regularly throughout the year!

4) **Lenten Cookbook** – There are many delicious and healthy recipes that are "fast-friendly" for any Lenten or fasting period in the Church. Look online for Orthodox Christian Lenten cookbooks. People shared recipes on many online recipe website. A great way to share ideas is a Lenten pot-luck and recipe share! Plan a youth event where everyone must prepare a Lenten dish and bring a copy of the recipe. Collect the recipes and make them available to everyone to take home! You could even make your OWN cookbook as a youth group!

"Into the Desert": a 40-day Lenten Challenge

Are you up for the challenge??

We are once again offering Into the Desert: A 40-Day Lenten Blog. Beginning on Clean Monday, this Lenten blog is designed to motivate, challenge, and inspire young people to grow in Christ during Lent. Young people can utilize the blog for their own personal Lenten journey. Youth groups can incorporate the blog into their youth group meetings and Lenten discussions. In fact, there are many ways you can use this blog! Families can start a tradition of evening Lenten discussions. Youth workers can follow the blog to deepen their own knowledge and spiritual growth. If you have a Facebook page or website, feel free to share the link with your friends and family. It is not too late to follow the blog! Visit www.orthodoxyouthministry.blogspot.com • www.youth.goarch.org.