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Great Lent: The Call for Renewal

by Fr. Athanasios Papagiannis

Every time we begin Great and Holy Lent, I can't help but think about a little icon that stands right outside my office door. It's an icon of the Theotokos holding her Son. There's nothing extraordinarily special about it. It's not an icon whose presence necessarily grabs you; it doesn't stream myrrh or elicit some special kind of emotional response, either. It's just sits there, old and worn, its best years seemingly behind it.

Seeing it in the condition it's in, it often generates a feeling of sadness to the person viewing it.

One of these days, I often tell myself, I'm going to restore that icon and bring its glory back for everyone to see.

In a very real way, all of us are like this icon. Every human being carries something of God in him for all to see, yet sin has distorted that image and covered it up, making it hard to notice the beauty it was meant to reflect.

But this can change.

Great and Holy Lent is the time of year when we really do something about our sad condition.

Lent is called "Great" not just because it is lengthier than the other fasting periods, but because it's also more intense.

Everything we do is taken to another level; a great opportunity rests in front of us.

Each year we're called to put forth an increased effort in our spiritual lives, and employ the therapeutic methods of our Church to get rid of the dirt that covers up an image of unspeakable beauty.

Indeed, each and every Lenten season, God gives his living icons the chance to recapture the glory they we're supposed to reflect, mainly through the notion of spiritual warfare.

The challenge for every Orthodox Christian is to take up the battle and renew ourselves. But what exactly does this battle for renewal look like? If we want to take Great Lent seriously and have a desire restore our image, what type of disciplined life do we have to engage in?

Listed below are some of the prescribed ways the Church calls for us to spend Great Lent.

The Call to Forgive

Lent officially begins not with any ordinary vespers service but with Forgiveness Vespers, a service where everyone in Church asks each other for forgiveness.

FOR PARENTS AND YOUTH WORKERS

* Are you on FACEBOOK? If you are a member of Facebook, you can visit us on our GOA Youth and GOA Young Adult Pages! Just search for GOA Youth or GOA Young Adults and BECOME A FAN TODAY!!

* Don't forget to sign up for the YOUTH WORKER PULSE! This is the weekly listserv of the Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. Subscribers will receive valuable tips, tools, and resources for creating a successful and transformative youth ministry experience. Sign up today at www.youth. goarch.org.

The Church sends us the message that the proper way to enter Great Lent is through the door of forgiveness. St. Leo the Great says: "Now is the time when generous Christian souls forgive offences, pay no heed to insults, and wipe out the memory of past injuries."

This is not to say that forgiving is easy. Sometimes forgiveness doesn't make sense. But when we see the great lengths the Lord Jesus Christ forgave people – even those who were crucifying Him - we can surely summon up the courage to forgive others, too. We should never let another day of Great Lent pass without seeking forgiveness from someone we know we've wronged.

The Call to Fast

The Church calls for the Orthodox Christian to enter into Great Lent with the expectation of spending the next forty days going without meat, diary and, on some days, without oil. The power of fasting is undeniable for the Lord Himself says in the gospel of Mark (Chapter 9 verse 29), that we do great damage to the enemy when we fast. But fasting isn't only about food. Fasting is really about abstinence, and this idea of abstinence includes abstaining from foods and ungodly actions.

The Call to Attend Service

During the Lenten season the Church increases the amount of services. Orthodox Christians are called to attend as many Compline Services, Presanctified Liturgies and Akathist Hymns as possible. It's through these various services that we not only call on God's sanctifying grace to join us in the battle of renewal, but we also gather strength as a community when we see people fighting for the same cause.

The Call to Confess

Every year in the spring, people across the country take part in a ritual called spring cleaning. As Orthodox Christians, spring cleaning takes place on what we in the church call Clean Monday, the first Monday of lent. People usually spend that day cleaning the house, making sure things are in order for the days ahead.

Spiritually speaking, the Church calls for us to clean and put things in order in a different way. This spiritual cleaning is called confession, the sacrament where one meets with a priest to confess the many ways he has missed the mark of being the Christian God wants him to be.

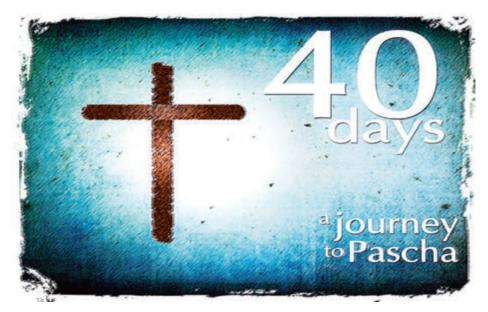
The Call to Read Scripture

Lent is a time when we limit how much we view television and visit the internet. Instead, the Church Fathers call for us to read the Bible. St. John Chrysostom calls the lack of reading scripture as one of the biggest reasons that evil exists in the world.

When we read scripture, our resolve to fight the battle of renewal increases, because we familiarize ourselves with why Christ came on earth, and we gain courage when we read about His struggle to free humanity and defeat the devil. It's in the reading of scripture that we remind ourselves why we do what we do, for when we lose our way many times it's because we lost our why first. Reading scripture then keeps us focused.

The Call to Increase Prayer

When one attends the services during Great Lent, one will notice that several prayers are inserted specifically for the Lenten season. The Church increases its



prayers to Christ and the Theotokos during Great Lent. Also, at the end of many Lenten services, the Priest will also recite the beautiful prayer of St. Ephraim.

The increase in prayer should also take place on a personal level, too. One of the most beneficial ways we can boost our prayer life is through the continual recitation of the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ Have Mercy on Me a Sinner"). At the same time, we can also increase the number of people we pray for, too.

Holy and Great Lent is a time of great challenge and opportunity for all Orthodox Christians. If we really knew the spiritual benefits and power of this great season, we would not respond to the beginning of Great Lent with a pitiful: "Oh great, lent is here." Instead we would respond with a resounding, "Oh, Great Lent is here!"

Keeping the great in Lent means that

we increase the fasting, the praying and the reading of scripture. We confess our sins and attend services more often during this period, often experiencing cravings, temptations and challenges as our reward for doing these things.

But this struggle never goes unnoticed. Ultimately, our actions are meant to solicit the saving and renewal action of a most loving God. He is our hope, our salvation.

For if God can change water into wine, he most assuredly change an old and worn icon into a renewed one at any moment's turn.

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SUMMER CAMP: Four Reasons Why It's a Great Choice!

Ask almost anyone who has gone to camp and they will go on and on about their unforgettable" summer. Summer camp is the site of fond memories, friendships, fun songs, campfires, S'Mores, and games. The friendships, the laughter, and even the difficult moments can make for an experience they will never forget. Ultimately, summer camp can be a transformative experience in the life of a young person. Orthodox Christian summer camps offer young people the unique opportunity to live in an Orthodox Christian community of their peers, meeting new people, and having a great time!

"40 DAYS: A JOURNEY TO PASCHA"

Make the journey and witness the Resurrection of our Lord! We are once again offering a 40-day Lenten Blog designed to motivate, challenge, and inspire all to grow in Christ during Lent. You can utilize the blog for your own personal Lenten journey. Also, church groups can incorporate the blog into their meetings and Lenten discussions. No matter where you are in your spiritual journey, this Lenten blog is for everyone! It's not too late to begin the journey to Pascha with other Orthodox Christians. So JOIN THE JOURNEY TODAY by visiting the link: www.orthodoxyouthministry.blogspot.com

The great thing is...you probably don't have to go far to find an amazing Orthodox Christian summer camp!

So why would anyone choose to go to an Orthodox Christian summer camp? Here are four reasons why it can be a positive, transformative, and life-changing experience:

- 1) Campers learn about Worship. Specifically, campers actively participate in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church.
- 2) Campers learn how to confidently and effectively Witness their faith as an Orthodox Christian.
- 3) Campers learn how to Serve God, each other, and all of their "neighbors."
- 4) Campers are able to experience a true Fellowship with their Orthodox Christian peers and they have lots and lots of FUN.

INFORMATION ABOUT ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CAMPS

For details regarding Ionian Village, the camping abroad program of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, visit www.ionianvillage.org. For a list of Orthodox Christian camps in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, please visit www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/youth/camping. To get more information about other Orthodox Christian camps from all jurisdictions, please visit the Orthodox Christian Camping Association website, www.orthodoxcamps.org.