

○ God, be attentive  
unto helping me!  
○ Lord, make haste  
to help me!



## HOW CAN WE KEEP GREAT LENT?

by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

We are approaching again the Great Lent, the time of repentance, the time of our reconciliation with God. Repentance is the beginning and also the condition of a truly Christian life. "Repent!" was the first word of Christ when He began to preach (*Matt. 4:17*).

Great Lent is indeed a school of repentance, to which each Christian must go

every year in order to refresh the understanding of his faith. It is a wonderful pilgrimage to the very sources of Orthodoxy, a rediscovery of a truly Orthodox way of life. Let us try to make these forty days as meaningful, as deep, and as rich, as possible.

"Fasting appears gloomy until one steps into its arena. But begin and you will see what light it brings after darkness, what freedom from bonds, what release after a burdensome life."

+ Bishop Theophan the Recluse (19th c.)

### Worship

The meaning and the spirit of Great Lent find their first and most important expression in worship. Not only individuals but the whole Church acquires a penitential spirit, and the beautiful Lenten services more than anything else help us to deepen our spiritual vision, to reconsider our life in the light of the Orthodox teaching about man.

### Fasting

The Orthodox idea of fasting is first of all that of an ascetical effort. It is the effort to subdue the physical, the fleshly man to the spiritual one, the "natural" to the "supernatural." Limitations in food are instrumental; they are not ends in themselves. Fasting thus is but a means of reaching a spiritual goal and, therefore, an integral part of a wide spiritual effort. Fasting, in the Orthodox understanding, includes more than abstinence from certain types of food. It implies prayer, silence, an internal disposition of mind, an attempt to be charitable, kind, and—in one word—spiritual. "Brethren, while fasting bodily, let us also fast spiritually..."

The Typicon and the canons of the Church give the description of an ideal fast: no meat or dairy products, total abstinence on certain days. "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (*Matt. 19:12*). But, whatever is our measure—our fasting must be a total effort of our total being.

### Prayer

We must always pray. But Lent is the time of an increase of prayer and also of its deepening. The simplest way is, first, to add the Lenten prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian to our private morning and evening prayers. Then, it is good and profitable to set certain hours of the day for a short prayer: this can



be done "internally"—at the office, in the car, everywhere. The important thing here is to remember constantly that we are in Lent, to be spiritually "referred" to its final goal: renewal, penitence, closer contact with God.

### Spiritual Reading

We cannot be in church daily, but it is still possible for us to follow the Church's progress in Lent by reading those lessons and books which the Church reads in her worship. A chapter of the Book of Genesis, some passages from Proverbs and Isaiah do not take much time, and yet they help us in understanding the spirit of Lent and its various dimensions. It is also good to read a few Psalms—in connection with prayer or separately. Nowhere else can we find such concentration of true repentance, of thirst for communion with God, of desire to permeate the whole of life with religion. Finally, a religious book: Lives of the Saints, History of the Church, Orthodox Spirituality, etc. is a "must" while we are in Lent. It takes us from our daily life to a higher level of interests, it feeds us with ideas which are usually absent from our "practical" and "efficient" world.

### Change of Life

And, last but not least: there must be an effort and a decision to slow down our life, to put in as much quiet, silence, contemplation, meditation as possible. TV, [web browsing, Facebook, movies], social gatherings—all these things, however excellent and profitable in themselves, must be cut down to a real minimum. Not because they are bad, but because we have something more important to do, and it is impossible to do without a change of life, without some degree of concentration and discipline. Lent is the time when we re-evaluate our life in the light of our faith, and this requires a very real effort and discipline. Christ says that a narrow

"Do not neglect the Forty Days; it constitutes an imitation of Christ's way of life."

+ St Ignatius the Godbearer (late 1st c.)

path leads to the kingdom of God and we must make our life as narrow as possible. At first the natural and selfish man in us revolts against these limitations. He wants his usual "easy life" with all its pleasures and relaxations. But once we have tasted of such spiritual effort, once we have made by it one step towards God, the reward is great! We discover a joy that cannot be compared to any other joy. We discover the reality of the spiritual world in us. We begin to understand what St. Paul meant by "the joy and peace in the Holy Spirit." God Himself enters our soul: and it is this wonderful coming that constitutes the ultimate end of Lent:

"If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him and we will come unto him and make our abode with him." (*John 14:25*)

Let us make this Lent a real Lent! ~ Amen!

For more lenten resources visit our parish website.

# GREAT LENT 2021

"The way is narrow  
that leads to Life..."



The desert

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