



March 10, 2016

Beloved clergy, matushki and faithful,

Christ is in our midst! As we prepare for Forgiveness Sunday and our Lenten Journey, I prostrate myself before you and ask your forgiveness for any way I have offended you in word or deed.

As we know Great Lent is a school of repentance, a time to reorient our lives and reorganize our priorities and become more fully partakers of true and authentic Life in the Kingdom of God. Our Church gives us the tools we need for this journey in opportunities to pray more frequently, receive the Holy Mysteries of Confession and Communion, and encourages us to give alms. For those unfamiliar with the term, "alms," it refers to charitable gifts for the poor, the widow and the orphan in Holy Scripture.

As a child growing up outside the Orthodox Church, one often thought about what he or she would give up for Great Lent. But Lent is not about what we are giving up, as though we are making some great sacrifice to obtain the favor of God. Lent is about getting rid of bad habits and sinful behaviours and getting our passions under control, or redirecting to their proper goal. If we see the Church discipline as a prescription to obtain optimal spiritual health, we approach Lent with a much different attitude.

We are not simply to eliminate certain foods from our diet, but to embrace the discipline or prescription so as to regain control of our thoughts and our bodies. As we all know, one may sin without the body, but one cannot sin with the body without the thoughts preceding it.

Therefore, the Church asks us to refrain from meat, dairy, alcoholic beverages, and olive oil on certain days as well as to refrain from watching television, watching movies, frivolous conversation, and those things that perhaps incite the passions leading into sin. In her wisdom, the Church asks us to remove the things that contribute to sinful behaviour and an outlook on life contrary to the Holy Gospel and gives us opportunities to read and hear the Holy Scripture, pray and receive the Holy Mysteries so that we may be transformed.

Often people will try all kinds of things the world offers to get their life under control or to kill the pain of their fallen passions. Yet, we do not turn to the Church and allow her

in her 2000 years of experience to lead us to spiritual health. Let us embrace the fast, the discipline of the Church, seek forgiveness and forgive one another, attend the services as frequently as possible and I can assure you that if you open your hearts to let the Spirit work, by Holy Week you will be feeling Great Lent is too short. Changes you once felt impossible, suddenly begin happen. We realize that it was not God who was distant from us, but we who had been living in exile from Him and the Life of purity and Holiness He calls us to attain.

St. John Chrysostom says that no one is too frail or sick to embrace the Fast in some form. If we cannot give up meat, we may at least abstain from luxury. Blessed Theophylact speaks of gourmandizing, i.e., embracing the letter of the fast, but still indulging in luxurious foods. No one has ever physically died from the Lenten Fast, but they have died to the world and became alive unto Christ.

Your unworthy father in Christ,

+ Mark

Archbishop of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania