



Summary of Great Lent

by Fr. Michael Shanbour

What is Great Lent?

Great Lent is a preparation for Pascha, i.e. “Passover,” the original name for the celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. (See 1 Cor. 5:1: “For indeed Christ, our Passover [or our Paschal Lamb], was sacrificed for us.”). The early Church understood that Jesus had fulfilled the original Passover Feast of the Jews, as He Himself had become the unblemished Lamb sacrificed for the remission of sins. In the old Passover, the blood of the Lamb was spread on the doorposts of the Hebrews so that the Angel of Death would pass by their households. This resulted in their being freed from slavery by Pharaoh in Egypt. Now, in the new Passover, the blood of Christ is shed on the wood of the Cross, so that He could destroy Death itself by His own death and set His people free from slavery to sin under the rule of the devil. As Israel escaped Pharaoh by passing through the waters of the Red Sea, the waters of baptism now free us from the clutches of the spiritual “pharaoh,” the death-bearing prince of this world. The new Passover, therefore, is a passing over “from death to life, and from earth to heaven.” Christ, the new Passover, freed us from slavery to sin and brought us into the promised land of God’s eternal kingdom through the life of the Church.

The forty-day period of Lent can be likened to the Israelite's forty years in the wilderness, through which God's acted to purify His newly formed community from idolatry and enslavement to passions. This time in the wilderness was required as a preparatory cleansing, so that sin could die out and God's renewed people could worthily take possession of the land of promise. In those forty years, the generation who had sinned after fleeing from Egypt literally died out.

Why Lent?

The time of purification in the wilderness is a "type" of our Christian penitential period of Great Lent. During Lent we seek to purify ourselves of sin and to put away any idols so that we might truly encounter the risen Christ on the day of Pascha and thereafter.

The practical origins of Great Lent are found in the special effort of fasting and prayer made by the earliest Christians in preparation for the celebration of Pascha. This period of fasting varied from a couple days' time to a whole week. (The week-long fast is the origin for what we call "Holy Week" today.) Eventually this preparation for the joyous observance of the Resurrection merged with the forty-day process by which the catechumens prepared for baptism at Pascha.

Thus, the faithful now also joined in the forty-day fast as a time for repentance and spiritual growth. All of this happened very naturally in the life of the Church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. By the fourth century, the Lenten season of fasting was a well-established and universal practice in the Church. The canons of the First Ecumenical Council consider participation in the Fast a requirement for Christians.

Great Lent is a time to get back to the basics and to be reminded of what our life is all about and what is actually life-giving for us.

For those who are catechumens, it is still a preparation for baptism, but for those who are already in the Church it is also a renewal of our baptism and a return to our “first love,” Christ. Instead of something out of the ordinary, Lent is in some sense more a return to the “ordinary,” what we should be doing all the time. But since most of us don’t have the zeal and staying-power to live continually within this Lenten reality, the Church gives us this special season so that we can experience it for a time, and hopefully grow spiritual each year as a result. (Hopefully, the efforts made during Great Lent will “bleed over” into the rest of the year).

By fasting, increased prayer, and a focus on almsgiving, we seek to peel away the layers of selfishness, self-indulgence and distractedness that we often fall prey to as we live a “normal” life in the world. We often become numb to our sinful inclinations and habits and forget our calling as those regenerated and reborn in Christ. Unconsciously we can begin to place other things before our pursuit of God and His kingdom. Simply put, we have idols. These idols allow us to indulge in our self-serving passions and thus, we become spiritually ill. Great Lent is a time to wake up from our lethargy and be attentive to our soul.

The Three Main Ascetical Disciplines

The Christian life has always been ascetical. The word “ascetism” indicates training (e.g. athletic training) attempting to shed all that weighs us down, for the sake of rising up to God and His kingdom. Christian asceticism includes the various forms of self-denial that strengthen our spiritual faculties and bring the body into subjection to the soul and to God. It is not a morose or sad merely human effort, but a lively engagement and desire for

an authentic relationship with God through His Son and the acquisition of divine grace and the Holy Spirit.

The three primary disciplines of Great Lent/Spiritual Life are:
Fasting, Prayer, and Almsgiving.

Fasting:

The purpose of fasting is to heal the disordered soul and bring the passions of the body into alignment with God. Fasting should lead to pure prayer and almsgiving (acts of generosity and mercy). True fasting is an attitude and lifestyle of watchfulness and wakefulness, awaiting the “Bridegroom” and seeking first the kingdom of God. Fasting promotes hunger for God, moderation and self-control. By fasting, we seek to realign soul and body and reorient ourselves more naturally toward spiritual things.

The Lenten Fast includes an abstinence from the following food categories:

1. Flesh-meats (includes fish, but shellfish is allowed)
2. Dairy products (milk, cheese, etc.)
3. Eggs
4. Wine (alcohol)
5. Oil (originally olive oil)

A reprieve is given on Saturday and Sundays for wine and oil.

One might ask why these particular foods? There are several reasons.

1. First, this diet seeks to bring us back to the life of paradise. In paradise, the Garden of Eden, no meats or animal products were eaten. All creation and creatures were in harmony. God gave the fruit of the trees of paradise for food. It was after the flood of Noah that God gave the blessing to eat meat.
2. These foods are both more filling and more pleasurable to the palate and stomach. The heaviness and richness of such foods

can weigh us down spiritually and hinder prayer and remembrance of the Lord. The Saints tell us that these richer foods are more likely to stir up our passions. The fast may help us remember that we eat to live; we do not live to eat.

3. The Lenten fasting regime is similar (if not the same) to the diet chosen by the Prophet Daniel in Babylon for his period of mourning: “I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself [with oil] at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled” (Daniel 10:1). Lent is a time of spiritual “mourning” (“Blessed are those who mourn...”) that brings sobriety and joy (“for they shall be comforted”). As the Lord Jesus foretold regarding his disciples, ““The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Prayer:

During Great Lent, we strive to increase the quality and quantity of our prayer life, both at home and in church (Matt. 6:5-7: “When you pray...”).

The goal of fasting is true prayer, and the goal of prayer is union with God, which brings love of God and neighbor. Fasting lightens our soul so that we might pray more authentically. The Fathers tell us that we are less likely to pray when our stomach is full and we feel satisfied with rich and fatty foods. Gluttony often leads to laziness and anger or lust.

Fasting without prayer is merely a diet, and prayer without love for God and neighbor is a dead and self-serving “religiosity.”

Great Lent is a spiritual “spring cleaning” in which we strive to acquire God’s grace for the purification and illumination of our

hearts. The Prayer of Saint Ephraim, which is prayed regularly in church and at home (i.e. in addition to one's personal "prayer rule") during Great Lent, gives the proper sense of the season: that we are seeking to empty our hearts of sin and then fill them with virtue.

The Prayer of St. Ephraim of Syria:

"O Lord and Master of my life:

Take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk. (prostration)

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to thy servant. (prostration)

Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother.

For blessed art Thou unto ages of ages. Amen." (prostration)

Almsgiving:

Another purpose of fasting is to lead us to the practice of almsgiving ("When you give alms...", Matt. 6:1-4). Almsgiving refers to acts of mercy and kindness, including financial support and other earthly blessings to those in need.

These three spiritual disciplines—fasting, prayer, and almsgiving—correspond to the three powers of the soul and target them for healing. According to St. Maximos the Confessor:

- Fasting heals the desiring power of the soul. (lust, greed, power)
- Almsgiving heals the incensive power of the soul. (anger, resentment, bitterness)
- Prayer heals the noetic power of the soul. (pride, ignorance, indifference)

Corporate Prayer:

One of the features of Great Lent is often an increase in corporate worship, but also in the more penitential atmosphere. The first week of Great Lent is particularly intense, with services every evening (and preferably every morning). Special prayers and services of Great Lent include:

Great Compline:

It is not specifically Lenten but it is ascetic and penitential. It is structured in three sections which begin with "O come let us worship," followed by Psalms, then hymns and prayers. Toward the conclusion we hear the beautiful hymn: "O Lord of Hosts, be with us, for we have no other help in times of sorrow but Thee; O Lord of Hosts have mercy on us."

The Canon of St. Andrew:

Not a service, but a penitential hymn written by St. Andrew of Crete. The Canon surveys the Old and New Testaments in a spirit of repentance. During the first week of Lent it is divided into four parts, with one part inserted into Great Compline Monday through Thursday of the first week of Lent and then inserted into Small Compline in its entirety in the fifth week.

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts (or "Presanctified Liturgy"):

During the weekdays of Great Lent, the Divine Liturgy is not offered, since it is always a joyful celebration of the resurrection of the Lord. In order not to leave the faithful without the Holy Body and Blood of Christ, the Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified Gifts (pre-consecrated Holy Communion) is offered in this service, which is attributed to St. Pope Gregory of Rome. The service includes prayers for the catechumens, similar to the Divine Liturgy.

Supplicatory Canon or Akathist to the Theotokos:

A hymn of thanksgiving to the Mother of God inserted into Small Compline and prayed in four parts on the first four Fridays of Great Lent, and then in its entirety in the fifth week.

The Sundays of Great Lent

Over the years each Sunday of Great Lent has been given a particular spiritual commemoration or theme. They are as follows:

First Sunday: Sunday of Orthodoxy (Celebrates the restoration of the holy icons to the churches after the Iconoclastic heresy was overcome). It is traditional for all the faithful to bring a special icon to church for the procession which takes place on Sunday evening within Vespers (but is often transferred to Sunday morning). The procession includes the Syndodikon (Affirmation) of the Orthodox Faith.

Second Sunday: Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas (14th century Archbishop of Thessalonika who preserved the Orthodox teaching on prayer, God's grace as His uncreated life, and the possibility of authentic union with God.)

Third Sunday: Sunday of the Holy Cross (The Feast originates from Jerusalem and the practice of bringing out the actual Cross of Christ for veneration as an encouragement for the faithful to persevere in their spiritual struggles for the sake of the resurrection and life eternal.)

Fourth Sunday: Sunday of St. John Climacus ("of the Ladder") (The great monk of the 7th century revered world-wide, whose book "The Ladder of Divine Ascent" likens the way of salvation and spiritual perfection as 33 steps or rungs.)

Fifth Sunday: Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt. (The infamous harlot of Alexandria who was miraculously converted and reached the heights of holiness through repentance.)