Our Lenten Journey to the Sacred Passion & Holy *Pascha*

Dear Beloved Brothers & Sisters in the Lord,

Our Holy Orthodox Church offers us the Great Lenten period each and every year to help us change our lifestyle in preparation for *Pascha*. It is a difficult time of self-examination and self-denial; a time for taking control of our lives and bodies. One hymn of our Church describes Great Lent as a time to ***". . .put away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, so that we may navigate the immense ocean of Lent"*** (Hymn from Forgiveness Vespers). The Fathers of the Church teach us that this great "ocean of Lent" when lived properly and spiritually, can be a source of strength that will carry us throughout the year. Another purpose of the Great Fast is to give us a greater awareness of our dependence on God. It is a time to improve ourselves and our relationship with God. Like anything else in life, the more we understand what is happening, the more we indulge in the feast, the more we will experience God's healing presence in our lives. Below are three excellent ways we can connect more with this special time of our Church.

1. ***Make a commitment on how you will fast during Lent***

As Orthodox Christians we fast from food to be able to fast from sin; and it is our sin that keeps us from experiencing God fully. The Church Fathers are clear on the connection between how we eat and how we sin. This connection is also something lost in our contemporary society. In America today, we do not hear much about how fasting can help a marriage stay together or how a family can learn to love God through fasting. Essentially, the more we indulge ourselves in whatever we want, the more we become enslaved to our desires, rather than free to love. Opening our marriages, our families, and all our relationships to fasting, opens up our hearts to be filled with the Grace of God and better ourselves as Orthodox Christians. Fasting helps sharpen our hearts and to forgive others as we strive to work on our relationships.

The fast for the forty days of Great Lent are indicated here, though many are not able to hold to the strict fast. Fasting rules for everyone are a personal thing. However, I offer the following guidelines which can be considered prayerfully with guidance of your spiritual father and in consideration of any medical condition or dietary requirements:

Strict Fast: No meat, fish, milk, dairy products, oil, or oil products. On Saturdays & Sundays, oil and wine are permitted.

Fast more commonly used: No meat, fish, milk, and dairy products.

Palm Sunday & the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25th): Fish, oil and wine are permitted.

Our focus should not always be on the food we eat but also on abstaining from evil and hatred that cling to our hearts. St. John Chrysostom admonishes: *"Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers?*"

2. ***Make a commitment to our Church Schedule during Lent***

The Church provides us opportunities to strengthen our journey during Lent with more than just one or two worship services during the week. Decide as a family at the outset of Lent, which church services you could attend. We make commitments to sports schedules and other hobbies and activities, let us now make a commitment to a worship schedule.

Check our Parish monthly calendar and make a point to attend at least one Lenten service as a family during the week. If you only worship on Sundays, your family will miss the Liturgical treasures that help make Great Lent more meaningful. In particular, Great Compline will be offered on Mondays; Pre-Sanctified Liturgies on Wednesdays; and, Salutations to the *Theotokos* on Friday evenings.

3. ***Make a commitment to family prayer at home during Lent***

It has always been said that the first church and the first school is the home. How nice would it be to turn off the television during Lent and pray more as a family? It is amazing to see how much more time you have in the day when you remove television from your daily schedule. Great Lent is a time to be together more in prayer than in front of the television. Some families pray together before or after a meal or before bedtime. Consider during this Lent to incorporate the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim as a family.

We can also take turns using a prayer rope saying the Jesus Prayer and praying for others who are sick, struggling, unemployed, in need of help, your loved ones, friends, missionaries and people in the world that you know and do not know.

Reading can also be an excellent discipline which will help us stay focused on the journey at hand. We can read from Scripture, lives of the Saints, and/or other spiritual readings which will give us knowledge of our Faith as well as nourishment for our soul.

I pray and wish a blessed and fruitful Lenten journey for all of you. Please remember: the goal of Great & Holy Lent through prayer and fasting is to let us experience God directly. It is a time for all of us to reorient ourselves towards God. Let us then not surrender to the temptations and allurements of this world, but "fight the good fight" and traverse this forty-day period with a spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love.

(This article has been adapted from *"Making Lent Great For Your Family"* written by Dr. Philip Mamalakis, PhD)