



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF NEW JERSEY

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΝΕΑΣ ΙΕΡΣΕΗΣ

Holy and Great Lent 2016

The Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy,
Honorable Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Esteemed Members of the Metropolitan Council, Esteemed Members of the Parish Councils, Philoptochos Sisterhood, Faculty and Students of the Catechetical and Greek Afternoon Schools, Directors and Participants of all of the Youth Organizations, and all devout Orthodox Christians of the Greek Orthodox Communities of our Holy Metropolis of New Jersey

*“Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man;
but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” (Mt 15:11)*

My Beloved,

In these first days of Holy and Great Lent, we enter the doors of purity. Our Holy Church invites us all, according to our strength, to follow the divine commandments of God in order to prepare ourselves to witness the glorious resurrection of Christ. We must get ready for this great encounter. We must purify our lives from all of their weaknesses, great and small. Our spiritual tradition teaches us to fast in different circumstances, not only by giving up certain foods, but by reorienting our whole life.

Fasting is identical to spiritual life. In the Old Testament, fasting was already central. *“And I prayed before the Lord a second time, as at the first, forty days and forty nights, I neither ate bread nor drank water...”* (Dt 9:18). The Lord himself fasted in the wilderness before beginning His public mission in the world. Fasting is not a diet. It is spiritual warfare, and it guides us towards abstinence and repentance. But remember that food itself does not make us good or bad. It is simply a visible sign of our spiritual life. What about the invisible signs of fasting? Saint John Climacus insists that: *“If I bind him (selfishness) by fasting, by condemning my neighbor I am handed over to him again. If, desisting from judgment, I overmaster him, then being proud of this, I am subjected to him again.”* (15, 88)

If you do not know how to fast, do not be afraid to ask your Parish Priests. Do not be afraid to go to confession, which is a crucial part of the invisible fast. But above all, do not be afraid to be joyful when you fast. The Church invites us to change, to become a better person, to love our neighbors, to help our families, to serve others and offer charity with simplicity of heart. Over the course of years, we are so easily absorbed by the world, running from place to place, constantly being urged to consume and to immerse ourselves in social networks. It is

time to say stop and to pray. It is time to rediscover the beauty of silence and to act with simplicity.

Fasting becomes a symbol of our life, of our life in Christ that should be consecrated to the Lord, especially through our participation in the Divine Eucharist. Christ is our point of reference. All of our efforts converge towards Him. Link the practice of fasting to attending services as often as you can during these forty days, so that the emptiness created by fasting is filled by the grace of God, which comes through prayer.

Because fasting is not a diet nor a question of ritual purity, and because we do not all have the same strength and physical ability to abstain from all animal products, we need to ask ourselves what in our lives is superficial and distracts us from doing good. Some people can follow all of the requirements, others cannot. What is important is to find the right balance through which our small sacrifices take part in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. *“But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps.”* (1 Pt 2: 20-21)

I would also like to ask all the faithful of our Metropolis to pray during this period for the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church that will be held in Crete on the feast of Pentecost. This is a historic event in the life of our Church and we should all pray for its success. Its success not only means reaching agreements on various ecclesiastical issues, but also showing that Christ gave His life for *“the life of the world.”* Let us pray for the Holy and Great Council. Let us pray for His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, whose mission in the service of Orthodox Unity is essential for the mystery of communion. By our common prayer we all become participants in this spiritual *kairos* as a way of glorifying our loving God.

May this Holy and Great Lent bring you many blessings, love, humility, patience and all of the virtues that we need for our salvation, and may we journey together to our Lord’s glorious Resurrection with joy, praying for each other and for those in need.

With Paternal Love and Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Metropolitan Evangelos". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The word "Metropolitan" is written in a larger, more prominent script, and "Evangelos" is written below it in a similar but slightly smaller script. The background of the signature area is a light gray grid pattern.

† EVANGELOS
Metropolitan of New Jersey