



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF NEW JERSEY

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΝΕΑΣ ΙΕΡΣΕΗΣ

Holy and Great Lent 2017

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

*“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,
but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14)*

My Beloved,

The hymnography of the Church compares the season we are entering today, Holy and Great Lent, to a stadium, a place of spiritual warfare, where we face our own weaknesses and passions. Nobody is perfect, but that does not mean that we should not walk on the path to perfection. Very few people are saints, but that does not mean that we are not all called to holiness. Rare are those who have had a transformative experience of God in their lives, but that does not mean that we should give up on the conversion of our hearts.

The blessed time of Holy and Great Lent teaches us, during the forty days until we reach the doors of Holy Week and ultimately of Holy Pascha, that *“all is vanity”* as it is written in the Bible (Ecclesiastes 1:1). It is a time of self-criticism, an opportunity to look back at our lives and to consider what matters and what we should abandon. By the presence of God in our lives, the light of His divine grace reveals the truth about ourselves, so we can change and become Christ-like, cleaning the image of God in us and exploring the powerful mystery of God’s likeness. On the feast of the Resurrection, having walked the path of conversion and virtue, we will see the shadow of an empty sepulcher, at the pinnacle of our spiritual journey. Our faith is not about a vacuum, but about the fullness of the grace. As it is written in the *Book of Revelations*, God has the power to *“make all things new”* (Revelations 21:5). In the seemingly tragic silence of that morning, three days after Christ’s crucifixion, sorrow turned to joy, the joy of a personal encounter with our risen Lord.

We must prepare ourselves for this mystical encounter. This is the significance of the journey we start today: becoming ready to welcome the Savior. Throughout the ages, our Orthodox Church, following the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, of the Canons and of the Holy Fathers, has offered us useful rules. If I had to summarize them, I would invite you to focus on

three things: fasting, prayer and conversion. In the Orthodox Church, we fast from certain types of food. But fasting is not an end in itself. The spirit of fasting is to practice abstinence from everything that prevents us from being open to God and to our neighbors. If we reflect a little more on that and honestly consider what prevents us from dedicating our time to God, we will quickly acknowledge how much time and energy we waste on things that are not essential and give us the illusion of reality. We should explore how to balance the temptations of today's lifestyle with simplicity, especially when it comes to the use of technology and social media. If you have any question about how you should be fasting, do not hesitate to ask your parish priest for spiritual advice. Fasting is so important in our Orthodox tradition that the Holy and Great Council, convened in Crete in June 2016, even issued a document that speaks specifically about the issue of fasting. It says: *"Accordingly, the Triodion praises fasting as grace that is full of light, as an invincible weapon, the beginning of spiritual struggles, the perfect path of virtues, the nourishment for the soul, the source of all wisdom, life imperishable, an imitation of the angelic life, the mother of all good things and virtues."* (par.1)

Fasting is not sufficient if we do not complete it with prayer. As your Spiritual Father, I encourage you to avail yourselves to the prayers of the Church, the divine services that structure these forty days. You will (re)discover the beauty of a poetic language, the sweetness of the sacred space, the closeness of our loving God talking to your heart. Personal prayer is also essential and can be done easily everywhere by just remembering the name of Jesus, as we are taught by the Desert Fathers. As Saint Macarius of Egypt (295-392) wrote: *"Those who draw near to the Lord ought to make their prayers in quietness and peace and great composure, and to fix their minds upon the Lord not with unseemly and confused outcries, but with effort of the heart and vigilant thoughts."*

Fasting and prayer naturally lead to conversion. Conversion, *metanoia* in Greek, is another word for repentance but goes beyond asking God for forgiveness. Conversion is a life changer that works in us by the transformative grace of the Holy Spirit. This is what I meant by exploring God's likeness in our lives by recognizing the image of God in mankind and the seal of the Creator in the whole world. By changing our hearts by the power of love, we will also transform the world around us. As Christ Himself said: ***"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*** (John 13:35)

Wishing all of you a blessed Lenten Journey culminating in our Lord's glorious Resurrection, I remain

With Paternal Love and Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Metropolitan Evangelos". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'M'.

† EVANGELOS
Metropolitan of New Jersey