

CATECHETICAL HOMILY  
AT THE OPENING  
OF HOLY AND GREAT LENT

**+ BARTHOLOMEW**  
BY GOD'S MERCY  
ARCHBISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE-NEW ROME  
AND ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH  
TO THE PLENITUDE OF THE CHURCH,  
MAY THE GRACE AND PEACE  
OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST,  
TOGETHER WITH OUR PRAYER, BLESSING AND FORGIVENESS  
BE WITH YOU ALL

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Most honorable brothers and blessed children in the Lord,

We glorify the God in Trinity, who has once again guided us as Church to the venerable and blessed period of Holy and Great Lent, the arena of physical and spiritual discipline and ascetic struggle, in order to prepare ourselves in a manner according to Christ and journey in humility to the Holy and Great Week and life-giving Resurrection of the Lord.

Ascetic discipline is of course not only a feature of Holy and Great Lent; nor is it solely a matter of concern and obligation to monastics; nor again is it a result of external influence on the Christian ethos, a foreign element in our devotional life. Asceticism belongs to the core of Christian existence and the life of the Church. It constitutes a calling by Christ to His faithful and a witness of His saving presence in our lives. As believers, we do not address an impersonal or inaccessible God, but the incarnate Word that revealed the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit, the fullness of grace and freedom. In this sense, filled with divine blessings and especially profound experiences, Holy and Great Lent remains a dynamic expression and revelation of the treasure and truth of church life in its entirety.

Nothing in the life of the believer is fragmentary or an end in itself. Life in Christ is holistic and undivided. Repentance, humility, prayer, fasting, good deeds – all of these are intertwined and orient the believer to the Eucharist of the Church, the eschatological

mystery of the Kingdom. Ascetic struggles are the beginning, the “narrow gate” that leads us to the Holy of Holies. In our tradition, there is never “asceticism for the sake of asceticism.” Ascetic discipline is always a journey; it is fulfilled when it becomes part of the Church, when it leads us to communion of the Sacred Mysteries, which in turn incorporate us into the movement of the Church toward the Kingdom. Let us remind you of the example of St. Mary of Egypt, who is honored on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. After forty years of harsh ascetic struggle and unceasing prayer, she sought to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ from the hands of St. Zosimas in full knowledge that Holy Communion is the source of life and medicine of immortality. In the same vein, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete, 2016), which described fasting as “a great spiritual feat” and “the expression par excellence of the ascetic ideal of the Orthodox Church,” emphasizes that “the true fast affects the entire life in Christ of the faithful and is crowned by their participation in divine worship, particularly in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist” (*The Importance of Fasting and its Observance Today*, § 1 and 3).

There is no Orthodox spirituality without participation in the Divine Eucharist, through which as believers we become one body, a communion of persons, the community of life, participants of the “common salvation” in Christ the Savior, who is the “common good.” Therefore, fasting is submission and obedience to the rule of the Church, a communal experience. Holy and Great Lent is an invitation for us to discover the Church as a place and way of sanctification and sanctity, as a foretaste and image of the splendid radiance, of the fullness of life and of the complete joy in the eschatological Kingdom. Experientially and theologically it is impossible for us to comprehend the spirit of Holy and Great Lent if we do not perceive it as a journey toward Pascha. The entire period of fasting preserves the “paschal perception” of life. Gloomy asceticism is a perversion of the Christian experience; it is the ignorance of the imminent grace and future Kingdom; it is life “as if Christ never came,” without expectation of the “resurrection of the dead” and of “life in the age to come.”

This spirit was the experience of the Fast before Pascha in the early Church, where it was a time when the catechumens prepared for Holy Baptism during the Divine Liturgy on the night of Resurrection. Even when, later, the catechetical nature of this period of fasting was replaced by the ethos of repentance, the experience of “repentance” as a “second baptism” was nevertheless preserved and remains as the existential disposition that leads us once more to the paschal eucharistic fullness of ecclesiastical life,

to the home of the Father, to the communion of the Holy Spirit. In this case, too, the “lifting of the cross” comprises the way to the ineffable joy of the Resurrection.

Throughout these days, the pious people of Ukraine carry their own weighty Cross, as they suffer the unspeakable abuses of an unprovoked, irrational and hostile war, which propagates pain and death. Co-suffering with our tested brethren and children, we intensify our supplication to the Lord of mercy and God of peace, unto the immediate cessation of this conflict and the prevalence of justice and peace, which are a foretaste of the redeemed joy of the Kingdom of God.

This selfsame salvific truth of the Orthodox faith, piety and spirituality is also emphasized by the event of the sanctification of the Holy Myrrh, which, by the grace of God, we will officiate at this year during Holy Week at our Sacred Center. This blessed and “divinely efficacious” oil of the “Eucharist of Myrrh” transmits the diverse gifts and manifold charisms of the Holy Spirit through the Sacrament of Chrismation upon the newly-illuminated “heavenly citizen” for strength and participation in the life of the Church – and foremost the communion of the Sacred Mysteries – as well as for the divinely inspired presence in the world and witness of the gift of grace and hope that lies in us. The character of the Holy Spirit as “force of communion” is also manifested in the way that the Holy Myrrh is prepared by boiling ingredients offered by the local Orthodox Churches as well as in the place and time of its blessing within the eucharistic assembly, immediately following the sanctification of the Holy Gifts, but equally in the other church uses of Holy Myrrh, such as the chrismation of heterodox and lapsed entering the Orthodox Church, the consecration of churches and holy altars, antimensions, and so forth.

With these sentiments, as we pray that the arena of fasting will prove smooth and our journey toward the Lord’s Pascha will be unimpeded, we invoke upon you – our most honorable brothers in Christ and beloved children of the Mother Church of Constantinople throughout the world – the life-giving grace and great mercy of Christ our God, who forever blesses the ascetic achievements of His people.

Holy and Great Lent 2022  
✠ **BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople**  
Your fervent supplicant for all before God

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To be read in churches on Cheesefare Sunday, March 6, 2022, immediately after the Holy Gospel.

ΛΟΓΟΣ ΚΑΤΗΧΗΤΗΡΙΟΣ  
ΕΠΙ ΤΗ ΕΝΑΡΞΕΙ  
ΤΗΣ ΑΓΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΕΓΑΛΗΣ ΤΕΣΣΑΡΑΚΟΣΤΗΣ

**+ Β Α Ρ Θ Ο Λ Ο Μ Α Ι Ο Σ**  
ΕΛΕΩ ΘΕΟΥ  
ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥΠΟΛΕΩΣ - ΝΕΑΣ ΡΩΜΗΣ  
ΚΑΙ ΟΙΚΟΥΜΕΝΙΚΟΣ ΠΑΤΡΙΑΡΧΗΣ  
ΠΑΝΤΙ ΤΩΙ ΠΛΗΡΩΜΑΤΙ ΤΗΣ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣ,  
ΧΑΡΙΣ ΕΙΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΙΡΗΝΗ  
ΠΑΡΑ ΤΟΥ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΚΥΡΙΟΥ ΗΜΩΝ ΙΗΣΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ,  
ΠΑΡ' ΗΜΩΝ ΔΕ ΕΥΧΗ, ΕΥΛΟΓΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΣΥΤΧΩΡΗΣΙΣ

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Τιμώτατοι ἀδελφοί καί προσφιλέστατα τέκνα ἐν Κυρίῳ,

Δοξάζομεν τόν ἐν Τριάδι Θεόν, τόν ἀγαγόντα ἡμᾶς ἐν Ἐκκλησίᾳ καί πάλιν εἰς τήν πάνσεπτον καί εὐλογημένην περίοδον τῆς Ἁγίας καί Μεγάλης Τεσσαρακοστῆς, εἰς τό στάδιον τῆς σωματικῆς καί πνευματικῆς γυμνασίας καί τῶν ἀσκητικῶν ἀγώνων, διὰ νά προετοιμασθῶμεν χριστοπρεπῶς καί νά πορευθῶμεν ἐν ταπεινώσει πρός τήν Ἁγίαν καί Μεγάλην Ἑβδομάδα καί τήν ζωηφόρον Ἀνάστασιν τοῦ Κυρίου.

Ἡ ἀσκησις δέν εἶναι, βεβαίως, χαρακτηριστικόν μόνον τῆς Ἁγίας καί Μεγάλης Τεσσαρακοστῆς, οὔτε μόνον ὑπόθεσις καί καθῆκον τῶν μοναστῶν, οὔτε ἀποτέλεσμα ἔξωθεν ἐπιρροῶν ἐπί τοῦ χριστιανικοῦ ἤθους, παρείσακτον δηλαδή στοιχείον εἰς τήν εὐσέβειάν μας. Ὁ ἀσκητισμός ἀνήκει εἰς τόν πυρῆνα τῆς χριστιανικῆς ὑπάρξεως καί τῆς ζωῆς τῆς Ἐκκλησίας. Ἀποτελεῖ κλῆσιν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρός τοὺς πιστοὺς καί μαρτυρίαν τῆς σωστικῆς παρουσίας Του εἰς τήν ζωήν μας. Δέν ἀπευθυνόμεθα οἱ πιστοί εἰς ἓνα Θεόν ἀπρόσωπον καί ἀπρόσιτον, ἀλλά εἰς τόν σαρκωθέντα Λόγον, τόν ἀποκαλύψαντα τήν ἀγάπην τοῦ Θεοῦ καί Πατρός καί τήν κοινωνίαν τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος, τό πλήρωμα τῆς χάριτος καί τῆς ἐλευθερίας. Ἐν τῇ ἐννοίᾳ ταύτῃ, ἡ πλήρης θείων εὐλογιῶν καί ἰδιατέρων βαθέων βιωμάτων Ἁγία καί Μεγάλη Τεσσαρακοστή, παραμένει δυναμικὴ ἔκφρασις καί ἀποκάλυψις τοῦ πλούτου καί τῆς ἀληθείας συνόλου τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ζωῆς.

Τίποτε εἰς τήν ζωήν τῶν πιστῶν δέν εἶναι ἀποσπασματικόν καί αὐτοσκοπός. Ἡ ἐν Χριστῷ ζωή εἶναι ὀλιστική καί ἀδιαίρετος. Μετάνοια, ταπεινοφροσύνη, προσευχή, νηστεία, ἔργα εὐποιΐας, εἶναι ἀλληλένδυτα καί προσανατολίζουσι τόν πιστόν εἰς τήν Εὐχαριστίαν τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, τό ἐσχατολογικόν μυστήριον τῆς Βασιλείας. Οἱ ἀσκητικοὶ ἀγῶνες εἶναι ἡ ἀρχή, ἡ «στενὴ πύλη», ἡ ὁποία μᾶς ὁδηγεῖ εἰς τὰ Ἅγια τῶν Ἁγίων. Δέν ὑπάρχει εἰς τήν Παράδοσίν μας «ἀσκησις διὰ τήν ἀσκησιν». Ὁ ἀσκητισμός εἶναι πάντοτε πορεία, καί ὀλοκληρώνεται ὅταν ἐκκλησιαστικοποιηθῇ, ὅταν μᾶς ὁδηγήσῃ εἰς

τήν κοινωνίαν τῶν Ἀχράντων Μυστηρίων, διά τῆς ὁποίας ἐνσωματωνόμεθα εἰς τήν κίνησιν τῆς Ἐκκλησίας πρὸς τὰ Ἔσχατα. Ὑπενθυμίζομεν τό παράδειγμα τῆς τιμωμένης κατὰ τήν Ε΄ Κυριακὴν τῶν Νηστειῶν Ὁσίας Μαρίας τῆς Αἰγυπτίας, ἡ ὁποία, μετὰ ἀπὸ τεσσαράκοντα ἔτη σκληρᾶς ἀσκήσεως καὶ ἀδιαλείπτου προσευχῆς, ἐπεδίωξε τήν μετάληψιν τοῦ Σώματος καὶ τοῦ Αἵματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐκ τῶν χειρῶν τοῦ Ἁγίου Ζωσιμᾶ, ἐν ἐπιγνώσει ὅτι ἡ Θεία Κοινωνία εἶναι ἡ πηγὴ τῆς ζωῆς καὶ φάρμακον ἀθανασίας. Καὶ ἡ Ἁγία καὶ Μεγάλη Σύνοδος τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας (Κρήτη, 2016), ἡ ὁποία ἀπεκάλεσε τήν νηστείαν «μέγα πνευματικὸν ἀγώνισμα» καὶ «τὴν κατ' ἐξοχὴν ἔκφρασιν τοῦ ἀσκητικοῦ ιδεώδους τῆς Ὁρθοδοξίας», τονίζει ὅτι «ἡ ἀληθὴς νηστεία ἀναφέρεται εἰς τὴν καθ' ὅλου ἐν Χριστῷ ζωὴν τῶν πιστῶν καὶ κορυφοῦται διὰ τῆς συμμετοχῆς αὐτῶν εἰς τὴν θεϊαν λατρείαν καὶ ἰδίᾳ εἰς τό μυστήριον τῆς Θείας Εὐχαριστίας» (Ἡ σπουδαιότης τῆς νηστείας καὶ ἡ τήρησις αὐτῆς σήμερον, § 1 καὶ 3).

Δέν νοεῖται Ὁρθόδοξος πνευματικότης ἄνευ μετοχῆς εἰς τὴν Θεϊαν Εὐχαριστίαν, διὰ τῆς ὁποίας οἱ πιστοὶ καθιστάμεθα ἓν σῶμα, κοινωνία προσώπων, κοινότης ζωῆς, μέτοχοι τῆς «κοινῆς σωτηρίας» ἐν τῷ Σωτῆρι Χριστῷ, ὁ ὁποῖος εἶναι «κοινόν ἀγαθόν». Οὕτω ἡ νηστεία εἶναι ὑποταγὴ καὶ ὑπακοή εἰς τὸν κανόνα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, κοινοτικὴ ἐμπειρία. Ἡ Ἁγία καὶ Μεγάλη Τεσσαρακοστὴ εἶναι πρόσκλησις νά ἀνακαλύψωμεν τὴν Ἐκκλησίαν ὡς τόπον καὶ τρόπον ἁγιασμοῦ καὶ ἀγιότητος, ὡς πρόγευσιν καὶ εἰκόνα τῆς ἐκπάγλου φωτοχυσίας, τῆς πληρότητος ζωῆς καὶ τῆς πεπληρωμένης χαρᾶς τῆς ἐσχατολογικῆς Βασιλείας. Βιωματικῶς καὶ θεολογικῶς εἶναι ἀδύνατον νά κατανοήσωμεν τό πνεῦμα τῆς Ἁγίας καὶ Μεγάλης Τεσσαρακοστῆς, ἐάν δέν τὴν θεωρήσωμεν ὡς πορείαν πρὸς τό Πάσχα. Καθ' ὅλην τὴν περίοδον τῆς νηστείας διασώζεται μία «πασχαλινὴ ἀντίληψις» διὰ τὴν ζωὴν. Ὁ σκυθρωπὸς ἀσκητισμὸς εἶναι κακὴ ἀλλοίωσις τοῦ χριστιανικοῦ βιώματος, λήθη τῆς ἐλθούσης χάριτος καὶ τῆς ἐρχομένης Βασιλείας, ζωὴ «σάν νά μὴν ἦλθε ποτέ ὁ Χριστός», χωρὶς τὴν προσδοκίαν τῆς «ἀναστάσεως τῶν νεκρῶν» καὶ τῆς «ζωῆς τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος».

Αὐτό τό πνεῦμα ἐνεσάρκωνεν ἡ πρό τοῦ Πάσχα νηστεία καὶ εἰς τὴν ἀρχαίαν Ἐκκλησίαν, ὡς καιρὸς προετοιμασίας τῶν κατηχουμένων διὰ τό Ἅγιον Βάπτισμα κατὰ τὴν Θεϊαν Λειτουργίαν τῆς Ἀναστάσεως. Καὶ ὅταν, ἀργότερα, ὁ κατηχητικὸς χαρακτήρ τῆς περιόδου τῆς νηστείας αὐτῆς ἀντικατεστάθη ἀπὸ τό ἦθος τῆς μετανοίας, διεσώθη καὶ παραμένει ὡς ὑπαρξιακὸν ὑπόβαθρον ἢ βίωσις τῆς «μετανοίας» ὡς «δευτέρου βαπτίσματος», τό ὁποῖον μᾶς ὀδηγεῖ ἐκ νέου εἰς τὴν πασχάλιον εὐχαριστιακὴν πληρότητα τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ζωῆς, εἰς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ Πατρὸς, εἰς τὴν κοινωνίαν τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος. Καὶ ἐδῶ ἡ «ἄρσις τοῦ σταυροῦ» ἀποτελεῖ ὁδὸν πρὸς τὴν ἀνεκλάλητον χαρὰν τῆς Ἀναστάσεως.

Τὸν ἰδικὸν του βαρύν Σταυρὸν αἶρει κατὰ τὰς ἡμέρας αὐτὰς ὁ εὐσεβῆς Οὐκρανικὸς λαός, ὑφιστάμενος τὰ ἀνείπωτα δεινὰ ἐνός ἀπροκλήτου καὶ παραλόγου ἐπιθετικοῦ πολέμου, ὁ ὁποῖος σκορπᾷ τὸν πόνον καὶ τὸν θάνατον. Συμπάσχοντες μετὰ τῶν δοκιμαζομένων ἀδελφῶν καὶ τέκνων ἡμῶν, ἐντείνομεν τὰς δεήσεις μας πρὸς τὸν Κύριον τοῦ ἐλέους καὶ Θεόν τῆς εἰρήνης ὑπὲρ ἀμέσου καταπαύσεως τοῦ πυρός καὶ ἐπικρατήσεως τῆς δικαιοσύνης καὶ τῆς εἰρήνης, αἱ ὁποῖαι εἶναι πρόγευσις τῆς πεπληρωμένης χαρᾶς τῆς Βασιλείας τοῦ Θεοῦ.

Αὐτὴν τὴν σωτηριώδη ἀλήθειαν τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου πίστεως, εὐσεβείας καὶ πνευματικότητος προβάλλει καὶ τό γεγονός τοῦ καθαγιασμοῦ τοῦ Ἁγίου Μύρου, τό ὁποῖον,

χάριτι Θεοῦ, θά τελέσωμεν ἐφέτος τήν Μεγάλην Ἑβδομάδα εἰς τό καθ' ἡμᾶς Ἱερόν Κέντρον. Τό εὐλογημένον «θεουργικότατον» ἔλαιον αὐτῆς τῆς «Εὐχαριστίας τοῦ Μύρου» μεταδίδει διά τοῦ Μυστηρίου τοῦ Χρίσματος τάς ποικίλας δωρεάς καί τά πολυειδῆ χαρίσματα τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος εἰς τόν νεοφώτιστον «οὐρανοπολίτην», πρὸς κραταίωσιν αὐτοῦ εἰς τό μετέχειν εἰς τήν ζωὴν τῆς Ἐκκλησίας μέ ἀπαρχὴν τήν κοινωνίαν τῶν Ἀχράντων Μυστηρίων, καί εἰς ἔνθεον παρουσίαν καί μαρτυρίαν περὶ τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς χάριτος καί τῆς ἐν ἡμῖν ἐλπίδος ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ. Ὁ χαρακτήρ τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος ὡς «δυνάμεως κοινωνίας» ἀναδεικνύεται καί εἰς τόν τρόπον παρασκευῆς τοῦ Ἁγίου Μύρου διά τῆς ἐψησεως συστατικῶν, προσφερομένων ὑπὸ τῶν κατὰ τόπους Ὁρθόδοξων Ἐκκλησιῶν, ἀλλά καί εἰς τόν τρόπον καί τόν χρόνον εὐλογίας του ἐντός τῆς εὐχαριστιακῆς Συνάξεως, ἀμέσως μετὰ τόν καθαγιασμόν τῶν Τιμίων Δώρων, ἐξ ἴσου δέ καί εἰς τάς ἄλλας ἐκκλησιαστικάς χρήσεις τοῦ Ἁγίου Μύρου, ὡς ἡ χρῆσις προσερχομένων εἰς τήν Ὁρθόδοξον Ἐκκλησίαν ἑτεροδόξων καί πεπτωκότων, εἰς τά ἐγκαίνια ναῶν, εἰς τήν καθιέρωσιν Ἁγίων Τραπεζῶν, Ἀντιμηνσίων καί ἀλλαχοῦ.

Μέ αὐτά τά αἰσθήματα, εὐχόμενοι εὐδρομον τό τῆς νηστείας στάδιον καί ἀνεμπόδιστον τήν δολιχοδρομίαν πρὸς τό Πάσχα τοῦ Κυρίου, ἐπικαλούμεθα ἐφ' ὑμᾶς, τοὺς τιμιωτάτους ἐν Χριστῷ ἀδελφούς καί τά ἀνά τήν οἰκουμένην τέκνα τῆς Μητρός Κωνσταντινουπολίτιδος Ἐκκλησίας, τήν ζείδωρον χάριν καί τό μέγα ἔλεος τοῦ αἰεὶ εὐλογουῦντος τά ἀσκητικά κατορθώματα τοῦ λαοῦ Αὐτοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ.

Ἁγία καί Μεγάλη Τεσσαρακοστή, βικβ' β.  
† Ὁ Κωνσταντινουπόλεως  
διάπυρος πρὸς Θεόν εὐχέτης πάντων ὑμῶν

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Ἀναγνωσθήτω ἐπ' ἐκκλησίας κατὰ τήν Κυριακὴν τῆς Τυρινῆς, ς' Μαρτίου, ἀμέσως μετὰ τό Ἱερόν Εὐαγγέλιον.