

The Orthodox Church in America
DIOCESE OF EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA
The Right Reverend Tikhon, Bishop of Philadelphia

March 6, 2011

To the Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy, Monastics and Faithful of the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we prepare to enter Great and Holy Lent, we are reminded by the beautiful hymns of the Church that this is truly a wonderful time of the year, a *precious season that clothes all of us with inward joy*. Orthodox Christians do not dread or fear this time of repentance and purification, but on the contrary, sing aloud: *Come let us welcome it with gladness, cleansing ourselves through abstinence and prayer.*¹

Our abstinence is not simply from certain kinds or quantities of foods, but from the impurities and passions that so often cloud our hearts and turn our minds away from God and against neighbor. And our prayer is not simply the external repetition of empty words, but our inner striving to attain communion with God. *O Christ, how excellent is this time of fasting, which Thou hast ordained for all the faithful. It turns us from our sins, and bestows upon us saving forgiveness and the gifts of grace.*²

Great Lent is a time to turn within, to focus on our hearts so that we might then reach out in love to those around us. Abstinence and prayer must bear fruit in almsgiving and good works towards all, not only friends and family, but even our enemies. *Let us make haste to wash away through fasting the filth of our transgressions, and through acts of mercy and compassion to the needy let us enter into the bridal chamber of the bridegroom Christ, who grants us great mercy.*³

The world is fond of reminding us that there is “light at the end of the tunnel.” But this is no help to those who are in need of light and consolation now. Whether we are weighed down by gluttony, addiction, lust, jealousy, loneliness, anger, resentment or pride, the time of the fast provides us with direct and immediate help: *for those encompassed by the darkness of their sins, the holy gateway of repentance now stands open, bringing light to all.*⁴

¹ *Lenten Triodion Supplement*, canticle v, page 46.

² *Lenten Triodion Supplement*, canticle ix, page 51.

³ Monday in Cheese Week, Aposticha, tone 8.

⁴ *Lenten Triodion Supplement*, canticle ix, page 51.

As the winter snows begin to melt around us and birds begin to chirp, the visible signs of Spring encourage us to enter this season of repentance with hope: *Today the grace of the fast shines upon all of us with the light of the sun, cleansing us from the gloom of sin.* But it is up to us to remain in this light by taking advantage of this time to purify our hearts, cleanse our bodies and clear our minds of every darkness. We can do this in practical ways, such as setting a watch over our mouths, guarding our eyes and shielding our ears from the temptations of the world.

The time of Lent is a most propitious time to restrict the time we spend in front of the television and computer, to make an effort to meet others in person rather than via email or social networking outlets. It is the time to refrain from gossip and judging our brother. It is the time to increase the time we devote to prayer and make an extra effort to fast. But as we work in this way, we must always remember the reason for which we do all these things:

O peoples, let us greet the Fast with joy, for the beginning of the spiritual contest is at hand. Let us lay aside the comforts of the flesh; let us make God's gifts of grace increase within our soul; let us suffer with Christ as His servants, that we may also be glorified with Him as children of God. And may the Holy Spirit, dwelling in us, give light to our souls.⁵

As we enter on this path towards the light of the resurrection, I humbly ask forgiveness of all whom I have hurt or offended in any way and I pray that the Lord will bless each of us with a profitable and peaceful Lenten journey.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+TIKHON
Bishop of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania

⁵ *Lenten Triodion Supplement*, matins apostikha, page 20.