

Dear Parish Faithful,

*"For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matt. 5:45)*

*"For God shows no partiality." (Rom. 2:11)*

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine Inheritance!"

**An Unforeseen Lent** - It was only two weeks ago, that we embarked on our lenten journey together as a parish community and within our own homes. Looking back two weeks ago, I am fairly certain that no one envisioned the environment that we are now find ourselves in with the outbreak and continuing spread of the coronavirus. Two weeks ago, it was still "over there," but now it is "here," and that changes everything. Everyone, of course, may have his or her own level of anxiety and unease - perhaps even fear - but we are in uncharted territory in the overall scheme of things today. This is all new for us. And yet, we are apparently making the necessary adjustments from day-to-day, as our normal life routines have been put on indefinite hold. You may or may not be at work at the same level; and your children are now home for the foreseeable future. No picnic on that account! I am now awaiting further pastoral directives by tomorrow from His Grace, Bishop Paul, but I am rather certain that our liturgical cycle will continue to be disrupted at least for the immediate future.

My pastoral concern is that we allow this to overwhelm us to a such an extent that we also suspend our lenten efforts and put our Church life "on hold" until life is again normalized. I believe that this would be a costly mistake because it is precisely the lenten lifestyle that will keep us focused on Christ at a time when that is essential for our interior well-being as we face this crisis, both as unique persons, as a community of faithful Orthodox Christians, and as members of our local communities. Our "spiritual lives" are not just one more pious option that we embrace or ignore based upon the condition of our "comfort zones" or immediate emotional or psychological needs. We always need Christ - actually "the One thing needful" - and especially when we are "anxious." (see Matt. 6:25-34) Christ is our only true consolation. So, *I strongly encourage everyone to continue with the lenten lifestyle that you decided upon just two weeks ago.* We all know how to make the necessary adjustments when needed. But the discipline alone of the lenten effort will surely strengthen us all and maintain within us a sense of purpose, even more so at a time of disruptive events.

With that in mind, I would like to offer some pastoral guidelines that, even if obvious, may be actually helpful to bring these things to mind:

+ Continue your Rule of Prayer, for sure both in the morning and in the evening. I will assume that we all have an Orthodox Prayer Book. Some are more comprehensive than others, and if you look through them, you will find prayers that are written by the saints for precisely "times of trouble." You may find a Canon of Repentance, or perhaps an Akathist to Jesus Christ or the Theotokos, These are now most timely.

+ Continue using the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim at home, alone or with the family. It is a powerful prayer as it is, but by using it at home it keeps us connected with the life of the Church. Our home, as St. John Chrysostom teaches is a "small church."

+ Continue your scriptural reading as you planned for this Great Lent. I would suggest chanting/reading a few psalms each day. The great penitential psalms are: 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143. Our parish website has the daily readings all printed out, together with the lives of the saints on their day of commemoration. Avail yourselves of this excellent resource: <https://www.christthesavioroca.org/todaysreadingsaints>

+ Continue with the lenten reading that you chose two weeks ago. At a time such as this, we need to be reminded of the "big picture" within which our lives unfold both in times of serenity and times of upheaval. Our Orthodox literature does that with great depth and insight.

+ Continue in the fasting practices that you chose to embrace two weeks ago to the extent to which that is possible. Outside of medical reasons or the unavailability of the fasting foods that we eat, I am not sure why we should abandon these practices. As I said above, the discipline of the fast in its own way gives us a sense of day-to-day continuity and purpose, and again, keeps us connected to the Church.

+ I rather doubt that many of you have a copy of The Triodion at home(!) to read the lenten services, Be that as it may, there are now many websites that provide streaming services that allow you "participate" to some extent in the liturgical services. Some have already told me how they watched the Liturgy at the Holy Transfiguration Monastery yesterday morning. I also sent out a copy of The Reader Service that is used when we cannot have the full Liturgy. Avail yourselves of these sources.

I would like to add, that we should all practice common sense and adhere to all of the helpful practical guidelines that are being given to us to help minimize the opportunities for the coronavirus to invade our lives. By now, we all know these thoroughly. By responsibly following these guidelines with care we can only help ourselves and our families - and our neighbors. It is "bad theology" to think that our "faith" will keep us safe. That really has nothing to do with it if you read the words of Christ quoted at the beginning of this letter. All are susceptible. For we all live in the same world with its manifold imperfections and brokenness. If we get sick, then it is our faith that carries us through that sickness together with medical care. No matter what happens we are always in the hands of God. *That* is our faith - the faith that has "overcome the world." (Jn. 16:33)

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