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ARCHPASTORAL MESSAGE FOR THE GREAT FAST 2008 HIS EMINENCE, THE MOST REVEREND DMITRI ARCHBISHOP OF DALLAS AND THE DIOCESE OF THE SOUTH

Dearly Beloved in the Lord:

“...And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich...” (Luke 19:2)

For Orthodox Christians these words signal the imminent approach of the Great Fast. Zacchaeus Sunday is the first of five Pre-Lenten Sundays, each with a theme related to repentance, revealing the true nature of the Fast and thus of the Christian life generally.

During Lent abstinence from various foods is stressed; dietary habits are given much consideration. As most Orthodox realize, however, the overall Fast is more comprehensive in scope and content. An authentic fast takes into account the whole of one's life, the voluntary stripping away of any activity and indulgence that prevents a person from seeing and knowing Christ as He is (Luke 19:3).

To those who would question the relevance of a fast for modern man it may be stressed that fasting is an ageless discipline, essential for every generation. It addresses man's fallen state, his need to be delivered from evil, enslavement to fleshly passions and the things of this world. *“Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting”* (Matthew 17:21). *“...all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any...”* (1 Corinthians 6:12; read on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son). Fasting is not an attempt to earn salvation, nor is it practiced as a form of self inflicted punishment for personal sins. Rather, with regard to ascetical efforts the focus is consistently on repentance, love and purity of heart, ultimately derived through an intimate union with Christ.

Thus during Pre-Lent – our preparation for the forty days – we hear about: Zacchaeus (Luke 19) who in the face of truth and love incarnate, repented, made restitution, and divested himself of all ill-gotten gain, thereby acquiring salvation; the Publican (Luke 18) who left the temple justified because of a brief penitential prayer, *“God be merciful to me*

a sinner;” the Prodigal (Luke 15) who “*came to himself*” and returned to the house of a loving father, prepared out of shame to renounce all “rights” as an heir, but was restored compassionately to his former dignity; the Second Coming of Christ (Matthew 25) at which time Love will be our Judge, and love – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned – will be a criterion for the Lord’s Judgment of men; and finally the necessity for people to forgive others (Matthew 6) if they in turn expect to receive divine forgiveness and open themselves to God’s saving grace. These lessons address man’s inner disposition, his growth in God’s likeness toward which the Fast is directed.

Looking further at certain liturgical particularities one may reference a hymn sung on the eve of Lent. It refers to the type of effort expected from the faithful and the reason why the Fast is highly anticipated each year, characterized by a quiet joy:

“Let us set out with joy upon the season of the Fast, and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us purify our soul and cleanse our flesh; and as we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit may we persevere with love, and so be counted worthy to see the solemn Passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness to behold His holy Passover.” (The Lenten Triodion, Bishop Kallistos Ware and Mother Mary)

Simply put, Lent is a time for cleansing the heart and soul, preparing for the “feast of feasts” which communicates to us the most profound mysteries of the Faith. The late Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann referred to Lent as a journey to Pascha. Indeed Christ’s victory over death is the goal as well as inspiration for the forty days. The light of the Resurrection, however, illumines the whole of one’s life.

As a “tithing of the year” the Great Fast provides an annual opportunity to recommit to basic Christian disciplines and to reassess priorities that guide us continually. The Fast places our feet back on the path of salvation; it provides a much needed focus on repentance, humility, love and forgiveness in light of that which is offered to us in Christ. By diverting one’s gaze from Christ a person easily falls prey to every temptation, he loses perspective on life. Historically many people have found this to be true. The pride of the Pharisee who “prayed thus with himself” has deluded many a Christian, it has divided Christ’s disciples over the centuries into differing camps over various issues at every level of Church life. Our generation is no exception. In this respect the following words of St. Paul written to the Corinthians are as applicable today as they were in the time of the Apostle:

“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, by brethren...that there are contentions among you...Is Christ divided?”
(1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

How powerfully these words ring presently throughout the Body of Christ. And yet, again, there is nothing absolutely unique about problems we experience in the modern Church. Divisions, controversies, “murmurings” amongst the faithful, unethical behavior; the history of God’s people is replete with such references as well as with instances of individuals who found perverse pleasure in promoting these things. Often our sin is that we fail to learn from the past.

What may also be found in history are examples of the wise and prudent rising above the pettiness of their day. They concentrated on “the one thing needful” while avoiding the spiritual pitfalls that entrapped so many, simultaneously and successfully addressing contemporary concerns. Such people are still in our midst. They inspire and teach by word and example. They continue to remind us that, “God is love,” and of the New Commandment, fulfilled by those who “deny themselves, take up their Cross and follow Christ.”

I call upon our Diocesan clergy and faithful to approach the upcoming Fast with reverence, a desire to be cleansed spiritually, “...*rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit... (so that we may be) counted worthy to see the solemn Passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness to behold His holy Passover.*” Come what may, we must never allow the evil one to divert our attention from the Lord. Zacchaeus experienced the blessings that await those who desire, ‘to see Christ, Who He is.’ May we be accounted worthy of the same.

Pray for me and forgive me, brothers and sisters in Christ.

With love in Christ

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Archbishop of Dallas and the South