



February 27, 2023
Protocol 02/010

To the Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America,

My Beloved Children in the Lord,

In the reading from the prophecy of Isaiah on the first day of the fast, we hear a word of caution. Our annual observance of times and seasons, our gatherings to worship, are not, in and of themselves, pleasing unto God. “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Who requires of you this trampling of my courts? Incense is an abomination to me. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.” (See Is. 1:11–15.) Lest we set out to fast hypocritically, believing that our abstinence will win us God’s approval, the prophet reminds us that external religion is futile without moral reformation. The Lord calls upon his people to “learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Is. 1:17).

But our sins, as numerous as the sands of the seashore, are not so easily corrected. We may seem to make progress toward one virtue, or triumph over one temptation. We may make some progress in serving our brethren and neighbors. But then we recognize further sins, perhaps sins we had never recognized before. There is no one good but God alone, as Our Lord himself declares (Mk. 10:18). Our fasting is useless without real change for the good, but real change for the good can seem to lie beyond our grasp. We are called to wash ourselves, to make ourselves clean, but we cannot do so (Is. 1:16). But the Lord, who loves us, who desires our salvation, who in love grants us freedom and desires our participation in his saving act, promises, through the prophet, what we cannot do: he will make us clean, provided we are “willing and obedient”:

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land... I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. (Is. 1:18–19, 25)

Great Lent, then, is not a time to show how pious we are in our observance of the fast and attendance at services. Neither is it a time to prove our great virtue by imagining that we, on our own strength, can take the fast like a cudgel to our sins in an act of moral heroism. No; Great Lent is a time to humble ourselves, to present ourselves to God as “willing and obedient,” and to allow him to cleanse the scarlet and crimson stains of our sins.

“Cleansing” describes a process, and the process of cleansing our sins can be, at times, painful. In another Lenten lection, the prophet speaks of a Branch that will appear, “beautiful and glorious,” in the future (4:2). This Branch is Christ, and we hope, grafted onto his vine, to share in the splendor of his everlasting kingdom. But for now, we must endure the digging up of the vineyard (Is. 5:5–6). The hedge of our pride, the wall of our vainglory—all this must be torn up, burned, trampled down.

We strive to keep the fast, to attend services, to make our confession, to repent and change our deeds and minds and hearts. We strive to devote ourselves to the good and defense and liberation and well-being of our brethren, the “true fast” chosen

by the Lord (Is. 58:6–7). But, even as we make our noble religious, spiritual, and social efforts, we are constantly confronted with all of our deep-rooted sinful habits: not just pride and vainglory, but ignorance, laziness, despondency, fear of the world, heedlessness, and more. If we are willing and obedient and truly desire God to use the fast to cleanse us, we will suffer—not because fasting is suffering, but because Lent, when faithfully kept, reveals many painful truths about ourselves.

Yet, even in the midst of this process of cleansing, we still find ourselves filled with the hope and joy of God coming into the world. On Monday of the Third Week, the reading from the prophecy of Isaiah is one we associate more usually with the Nativity season: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shone. For unto us A Child is born; unto us a Son is given” (Is. 9:2, 6). But truly, that which began at Christmas continues throughout Lent. As our vices are uprooted, as our sins are cleansed, room is being made in our hearts, not for us, but for Jesus Christ. He came as a Child, and now he is growing. He is increasing as we decrease (Jn. 3:30). Just as cleansing is a process, so does Christ come to us gradually, as much as we can receive him. And, because he is the boundless God, the very Fountain of goodness, “of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end” (Is. 9:7). Thus, even in the most painful moments of ascetic struggle, repentance, and consciousness of our sinfulness, we are always full of hope, because the bountiful Lord always desires to give his gifts to us more fully.

We are also filled with hope because our cleansing is finite; we are headed towards an End. Yes, our purification lasts for a time—throughout this Lent, throughout this life, throughout our dying and passage to eternal life. But our purification, and the means of our purification, are bound to end. Just as God used Assyria to correct the Israelites of old, but then promised to “break the Assyrian in my land” (Is. 14:25), so God uses the time of our exile from paradise, the conditions of our mortality, to bring us to repentance and, we hope, to some measure of holiness. At the beginning of the fast, we leave the garden with our first parents; at the end of the fast, we return again with Christ. And this is the pattern of our life in this world. We are thrown into mortality because of sin, but the Lord uses our mortality to correct us, to turn our attention back toward him. And then mortality will have done its work, and it will be cast away. In the end, the Lord who is the End, who tramples down death by death, will defeat death, the last enemy (1 Cor. 15:26).

In order to overcome the consequences of our sin, Jesus Christ has taken on our nature; he is wounded to heal our wounds; he dies in order to put death to death. But his identification with us does not merely heal our nature; it also allows our greater identification with him. As the prophet Isaiah will announce on Holy Saturday, the Lord clothes us, unworthy though we be, in “the garments of salvation” and the “robes of righteousness” (Is. 61:10). These garments are not of our own making; they are the garb of his salvation and his righteousness. We are not only saved from sin and death; we are remade into the likeness of his goodness and his justice. “You shall be called by a new name which the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord... for the Lord delights in you” (Is. 62:2–4).

And so, as we enter into the mystery of the Lenten struggle, as we prepare to encounter the great mystery of the Lord’s Passion and Rising, let us be “willing and obedient,” making our efforts in good faith but relying on the Lord to cleanse us, fill us with hope, and lead us always closer to himself, who is the End for whom we are made, and who desires to fill us with good things, now and throughout eternity. To him be all glory, unto ages of ages.

Wishing you good strength during the forty days of the fast,
And asking each of your forgiveness for all of my many sins,
I remain,
Yours in Christ,

+TIKHON
Archbishop of Washington
Metropolitan of All America and Canada