

# A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

*Glory be to Jesus Christ!      Glory be Forever!*



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1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Great Lent—Triumph of Orthodoxy

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In the Church tradition, the first Sunday of Great Lent is called the Sunday of Orthodoxy. While the choir sings “Memory eternal,” priests pray for the repose of all those who labored to establish the Orthodox Faith with their words, works, suffering and virtuous life: Orthodox hierarchs, righteous monarchs, warriors who laid down their life for the faith and the motherland, and all those who strived to gain virtues.

That is why some may believe that the Sunday of Orthodoxy is a feast of religious victory, a triumph of one Christian denomination over the others. But we can easily be assured that that is wrong by merely looking closer at the historical background. The Feast of Orthodoxy is inseparable from the Council of Constantinople, called by Empress Theodora in 843 to restore veneration of icons in the Byzantine Empire.

The Church was not yet formally split into Eastern and the Western in the ninth century; and there were no Protestant organizations then that would later call themselves churches. The iconoclastic controversy was a dispute inside one Church over how we should venerate the Lord in the “right” way.

The Iconoclasts insisted on praying  
*(continued p.3)*

++ 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Great Lent ++  
+ Triumph of Orthodoxy +

Epistle: Heb. 11:24-26; 32-12:2

Gospel: John 1:43-51

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity -  
Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to living out Christ’s commandment to, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

## Thoughts on Great Lent, by Metropolitan Ioil

There are about seven weeks of strict fasting, eight if you include the Cheese-fare week which precedes. For a lot of people this is an enjoyable and desirable time, for others it’s difficult and for others again not at all pleasant. We’ll try to convey some thoughts on this period, as it has been described by the Fathers of the Church.

First of all, let’s recall Saint John of Damascus, who made a general observation concerning Lent. ‘Do not weaken Lent, for it is an imitation

of Christ’s way of life’. This is important. Christ doesn’t debilitate, that is drain the power of Lent. More broadly, we might say that St. John doesn’t disparage Lent.

He doesn’t say that this period isn’t right, nor does he mock the fast of the Church. He doesn’t dishonor it, he’s not displeased when it arrives, he doesn’t hope for it to pass quickly, he doesn’t make a show of breaking it without reason and nor does he express forcefully the view that times have changed and we

must change with them.

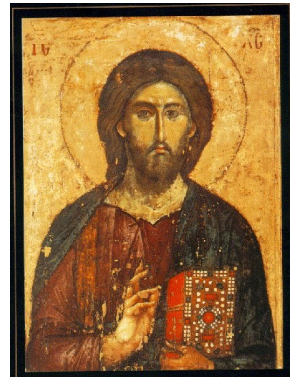
Great Lent is an imitation of the life of Christ. After His baptism, He went out into the wilderness and there ‘having fasted for forty days and forty nights, he became hungry’ (Matt. 4, 2). Christ was the perfect human being and had no disposition to sin, but He needed to give us a model. We had to have an image of asceticism before us to achieve our goal, which is union with God.

During this period, He  
*(continued p.2)*

We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please call Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to Jesus Christ.  
Glory be Forever.





As the deliverer  
of captives  
and defender  
of the poor,  
healer of the infirm  
and champion of kings,  
victorious great  
martyr George  
intercede with Christ  
our God that our souls  
may be saved.

### News and Notes

We welcome all who are with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

### Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Fr. Michael, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, Joann, Skip, Georgia, Colleen, Stan, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Grace the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

### Insight into Lent

Amid the turbulence of our life, the deafening noise surrounding us, the long and pointless conversations on the telephone or in person, the stress and uncertainty regarding the state of the world today and tomorrow, the Church offers us the period of time of Great Lent.

The Church as a way of life is what all of us want in the depths of our heart: peace, respite, completeness and an expe-

rience of eternal life. Nevertheless, the inability to attain this is a given, because along with the desire there are also the passions which, as ailments of the soul, confuse and upset us, leading us astray into chaos.

The period of Great Lent becomes the occasion for a taste of another way of life, different from that which we live during the rest of the year. It's a chance to seek longingly for the kingdom of God, as joy and resurrection. Through the fast, we know by experience that the strength of the body doesn't depend entirely on food and that we need God's grace more than material goods. This is why the fast must be accompanied by prayer.

This whole internal journey from sin to repentance, from the darkness of the self into the light of Christ, already brings us to Easter, to Pascha, which means the Passover or 'the passage/crossing over.' So Easter isn't a feast that interrupts life's routine, but is rather the transition into a new life. The Lord's Pascha becomes our own Pascha and his resurrection becomes ours.

### Thoughts on Lent, cont'd from p.1

Suffered the temptations of the devil and during the time of these temptations, angels ministered to him. (Mark, 1, 13). This time of Christ's temptations has much to teach us.

In a way, Christ was educated in temptations through fasting. Later, the devil would bear down upon Him like a dreadful tempest. He emerged the victor from all the temptations. As should the faithful. We'll have plenty of temptations in our life. We need to be educated in them. This period of Lent is a spiritual preparation for us Christians. We learn to fight. The Lord has shown us how, since He was tempted first.

During the time of when He fasted, Christ was tempted and triumphed. The faithful are also tested. Why does God allow temptations? So that we can find out that we can rise above them. So that we'll be humbled. So that the fiend can learn that we've abandoned him. So that we can strive. So that we can have direct experience of God's gift. The angels of the Lord minister to those who strive.

The devil tested Christ during the period of His fast not only by certain means but also by the place He was in. Solitariness and isolation are often weapons of the devil. One example of this is Eve, whom he tempted when



she was away from Adam. Isolation also sometimes brings monotony, sloth, hunger and anguish. So during a time of fasting, he takes heart and attacks us. When he sees us with others and well-organized, he doesn't have the courage to do us any great harm (according to Saint John Chrys-

ostom). This is why, during the fast, we should go to church, to the services, and support each other and be encouraged by the fact that we're not alone in the struggle, but that we have the whole of the Church with us. The Lord was encouraged by the angels of God. So you can see what benefit we derive from holy Lent.

And then another Saint of the Church, John Chrysostom, writes that, during the period of great Lent, we trade our spiritual merchandise and acquire a wealth of virtues. He stresses that it's no great achievement simply to get through the days of the fast, but that what's important is to correct some of our flaws and to be cleansed of our sins.

It's not unusual to hear people asking others how many weeks they've fasted and to find out that some have fasted for one, some for two, or three and others for the whole time. But what's the profit in fasting for the whole of Lent, unless we acquire some virtue during that time?

(continued p.4, column 1)



to God without any icons; they forbade them with reference to the commandment given to Moses: You should have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3). Citing the words of Christ, that we should worship God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24), the Iconoclasts promoted rational veneration as the only right (in their opinion) way of turning to the Lord.

In venerating images of Christ, we honor Christ Himself. The Iconophiles were also sure that the human mind was the means that helps us take our attitude towards God and express it in words, but the icons, in their view, did not prevent us from worshipping God in the right way. Icons are not idols, and we worship only the Lord. We venerate icons for they have a gleam of the Divine grace, a gleam of divine beauty. Looking at icons that are physical and tangible, we begin reflecting on things that are Divine and comprehensible. We see images of saints, and our mind contemplates their life.

We kiss an image of the Theotokos depicted on an icon, but in fact, we give honor to her more pure name. St. John Damascene wrote, “When we do not have the Lord’s passion in mind and see the image of Christ’s crucifixion, we often recall His saving passions. We fall down and worship not the material the cross is made of, but the One Who is imaged: just as we do not worship the material of which the Gospel is made, nor the material of the Cross, but what these typify.” Venerating an image of Christ, we honor Christ Himself, for, according to St. Basil the Great, the honor given to the image passes over to the prototype.”

In his treatises, *Against Those Who Revile Holy Images*, St. John of Damascus emphasized that the Old Testament’s ban on graven images was of transitory character. After the invisible Lord became visible and tangible in the incarnation of God the Son (John 1:1-5), idolatry became something unthinkable, for Christ’s disciples saw their God and witnessed with their own eyes His Glory on Mount Tabor. For God was manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16), and we saw [Him] with our own eyes, we looked upon Him and our hands handled [Him] as the apostle John says (cf. 1 John 1:1), we can have images of Him on holy icons.

That is the attitude towards the holy icons upheld at the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The doctrine that the

icon is the essential evidence proving that God the Son really incarnated has since then become an inseparable part of the theological heritage of the Orthodox Church. Therefore, when nowadays we enter an Orthodox church, we perceive the beauty of the Divine world through the services and the interior, taking it as a special place where God is present.

If we look up “beautiful” in a dictionary we will see that it is something that gives you great aesthetic and moral pleasure. Beauty—inner beauty—can be spiritual; we may find someone attractive; we admire the beauty of nature, music and poetry. Holy Scripture suggests that we have a different understanding of what is beautiful, and it evaluates everything by comparing it to the Lord. He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time (Ecclesiastes 3:11). In the Biblical lexicon, beauty is not only something that is pleasant to look at, but of high quality, impeccable, both physically and morally noble.

If we apply “beauty” to God, it is close to words like “light”, “glory” and “honor.”

St. Dionysius the Areopagite noted, “Beauty calls all things to Itself, and that is why it is called beauty. In examining something beautiful, we seem to become a part of it. Admiring the beauties of the world, we seem to be revealing the mystery of God’s creation (cf. Rom. 1:20), we feel aesthetic pleasure and remember beautiful moments of our life, we begin to value our life and take care of nature. “If someone looks carefully at the radiance and grace of this Beauty, he will learn something from it... exposing his face to colorful rays,” wrote St. Basil the Great.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us follow the words of the

apostle Paul and begin adorning ourselves not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but with good works (1 Tim. 2:9—11). Let us not behave like the Pharisees and be like whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness (Matt. 23:27). Let us turn our eyes to the beauty of the Christ, the Theotokos and the saints, so that we can begin to see the unspeakable beauty of the prototype in their images, and the radiance of divine glory, so that we may all ascend to the Heavenly world, where all the heavenly powers venerate God, where the souls of the saints, who are constantly seeking the Lord, taste divine blessedness. Amen.



If somebody tells you that they fasted for the whole of Lent, tell them: 'I had an enemy and we became reconciled; I was in the habit of criticizing and stopped; I used to swear but was cured of that bad habit' ... We'll derive no benefit from the fast if all we do is somehow get through it any old how. If we abstain from foods, then, when the forty days are over, the fast ends. But if we abstain from sins, then, when the time of fasting has ended, this fast (from sins) will remain and continue and will render us no small returns even before [we reach] the Kingdom of Heaven.

So we see that great Lent isn't just a time for us to fast from food but is also an opportunity for us to practice virtue. When we manage to achieve that, then, on the great day, we'll be worthy to approach the spiritual table, that is the divine Eucharist, and partake in the meal. Our attendance at the sacrament of life is sufficient motive for us to bestir ourselves in the spiritual struggle.

St. Gregory the Theologian emphasizes that the fast is also the purification of our self. Before the great day of Easter, 'it is cleansing for the feast'. Christians are able 'to die with Christ'. Just as Christ mortified His body for the salvation of the world, so we can mortify our passions for our own salvation. The Lord fasted a short time before His temptation; we fast before Easter. If we pass through the arena of Great Lent with thoughts such as these, we'll be a lot better off for it

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This example from the life of Saint Paisios is particularly apt. We all know the fortitude and the bravery to the point of harshness towards himself that he showed in the last stage of his illness. Yet when his fellow monk Fr. Athanasios fell ill, Saint Paisios went down to Athens and sat beside him for a month, providing aid and comfort, praying fervently, supporting him until the last moment. Him and other sick people who were in need. Since he had the necessary discernment, Saint Paisios urged the doctors to explain to the patient the severity of his condition. When Father Athanasios became despondent, Saint Paisios stood by him and, through his example and words, changed him from someone at

death's door to a preacher of the true life, despite the fact that Fr. Athanasios passed away shortly afterwards.

Things are more difficult when we have to deal with cases of young people and children with an incurable disease, and with their parents. Children who are sick often surprise us with their faith, their wisdom and their maturity, which goes beyond their physical age. As Sister Magdalene from Essex says, they become teachers who keep trust in God alive, even when our hearts bleed.

Before we close, I'd like to quote the case of a 9-year-old girl who was suffering from cancer. *The mother was in despair and, in front of the child, kept bemoaning the lack of love shown them by God. I thought I should show the girl a more positive approach, so I took her for a walk in the garden. As we were walking, we*



*looked at the birds and chatted. Part of our discussion went something like this.*

*Sister Magdalene: You know that your headaches don't mean that God doesn't love you. He knows what it feels like to be in pain as you are, because he himself felt pain on the cross. You're a special friend of Jesus Christ. He loves everyone, but he allows the brave to have headaches, and so they share his pain on the cross.*

*The girl nodded seriously and I saw that she already knew all this and didn't need me to tell her. Moreover, she had the wisdom to add: 'But, sister, please don't talk to my mother*

*about this, because she doesn't like it. She thinks I should live'.*

A couple of very brief observations: The person with the problem in this instance was the mother. But we see that Sister Magdalene didn't say anything to her. Not as a slight, but because she had the discernment to see that the woman was in no state to listen.

She focuses her interest on the sick girl, seeks and finds an appropriate way of speaking positively about the trial of her sickness, and thus restores spiritual contact with her. She realized that the girl had spiritual maturity and was aware of her condition and she, Sister Magdalene, makes her own pedagogical and pastoral self-critique when she writes that, in the end, she didn't need to speak to the girl.