

Prot. No. 71

CATECHETICAL HOMILY
At the Opening of Holy and Great Lent

+ BARTHOLOMEW

By God's mercy Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome
and Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Plenitude of the Church

May the Grace and Peace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
Together with our Prayer, Blessing and Forgiveness Be with All

Most honorable brother Hierarchs and blessed children in the Lord,

By the goodwill and grace of the all-merciful and all-benevolent God, already living in the blessed and reverent period of the Triodion, tomorrow we enter Holy and Great Lent, the arena of fasting and "venerable abstinence" that eliminate the passions, during which the depth and wealth of our Orthodox Tradition and the vigilant care of the Church for the spiritual progress of its children are revealed. As we are reminded by the Holy and Great Council of Crete (June, 2016), "the Orthodox Church, in strict conformity with the apostolic precepts, the synodal canons, and the patristic tradition as a whole, has always proclaimed the great significance of fasting for our spiritual life and salvation" (*The Importance of Fasting and its Observance Today*, para. 1).

In the life of the Church, all matters have a solid theological foundation and soteriological reference. Orthodox Christians share the "common struggle" of ascesis and fasting "giving thanks in everything" (Thess. 5.18). The Church invites its children to run the race of ascetic exercises as a journey toward Holy Pascha. It is a central experience of the life in Christ that genuine asceticism is never despondent, since it is imbued with the expectation of resurrectional delight. Our hymnology speaks of the "spring of fasting."

In this sense, far from the trappings of Neoplatonist dualism and the alienating efforts to “mortify the body,” genuine asceticism cannot conceivably aim at the eradication of an “evil body” for the sake of the spirit or the liberation of the soul from the torment of its shackles. As emphasized, “in its authentic expression, ascesis is not directed against the body but against the passions, whose root is spiritual because the intellect is the first to fall to passion. Thus, the body is hardly the great opponent of the ascetic.”

The ascetic endeavor pursues the transcendence of egocentrism, for the sake of love that “does not seek its own” and without which we remain enslaved within ourselves, in the “insatiable ego” and its unquenchable desires. Being self-centered, we shrink and lose our creativity, as has been said: “Whatever we give is multiplied; and whatever we retain for ourselves is lost.” For this reason, the wisdom of the Fathers and the experience of the Church associate the period of fasting with the “showering of mercy,” with good deeds and philanthropy, which are the evidence of surpassing self-love and acquiring existential fullness.

Such wholeness is at all times the characteristic of life in the Church. The liturgical life, ascesis and spirituality, pastoral care and good witness in the world, are expressions of the truth of our faith, interconnected and mutually complementary elements of our Christian identity, which share the eschatological Kingdom as a point of reference and orientation, as well as the completeness and fulfilment of the divine Economy. While church life in all its expressions reflects and depicts the coming Kingdom of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it is the mystery of the Divine Eucharist that above all, as underlined by the late Metropolitan John of Pergamon, recently of blessed memory, “expresses the Church in its fullness” (*The Image of the Heavenly Kingdom*, Megara 2013, p. 59). “Pure communion,” the rendering of our existence into that of the church, as participation in the Holy Eucharist, is the “end” of fasting, the “crown” and “prize” of ascetical struggles (see John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Isaiah VI: On the Seraphim*, PG 56.139).

Today, in an age of desacralization of life, when humankind “attributes great importance to entirely insignificant things,” our Christian mission is the practical elevation of the existential depth of our Orthodox “trptych of spirituality,” as the inseparable unity of liturgical life, ascetic

ethos and solidarity, the essence of the revolution of values in the fields of ethos and civilization constituted by faith in Christ and the divinely-granted freedom of the children of God. We consider it of paramount importance that we should live Holy and Great Lent as a revelation and experience of the true meaning of freedom “for which Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5.1).

With these thoughts and sentiments of love and honor, we wish you, our most honorable brothers in Christ and spiritual children of our Mother Church throughout the world, a smooth course in the arena of fasting, invoking on all of you the grace and mercy of Christ our God, who always delights in the ascetic struggles of His people. To Him belongs the blessed and glorified power of the Kingdom, now and always, and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Holy and Great Lent 2023
✠ **BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople**
Your fervent supplicant for all before God

To be read in churches on Cheesefare Sunday, February 26, 2023,
immediately after the Holy Gospel.

ΛΟΓΟΣ ΚΑΤΗΧΗΤΗΡΙΟΣ
ΕΠΙ ΤΗΣ ΕΝΑΡΞΕΙ
ΤΗΣ ΑΓΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΕΓΑΛΗΣ ΤΕΣΣΑΡΑΚΟΣΤΗΣ

+ Β Α Ρ Θ Ο Λ Ο Μ Α Ι Ο Σ

ΕΛΕΩΙ ΘΕΟΥ

ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥΠΟΛΕΩΣ - ΝΕΑΣ ΡΩΜΗΣ

ΚΑΙ ΟΙΚΟΥΜΕΝΙΚΟΣ ΠΑΤΡΙΑΡΧΗΣ

ΠΑΝΤΙ ΤΩΙ ΠΛΗΡΩΜΑΤΙ ΤΗΣ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣ,

ΧΑΡΙΣ ΕΙΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΙΡΗΝΗ

ΠΑΡΑ ΤΟΥ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΚΥΡΙΟΥ ΗΜΩΝ ΙΗΣΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ,

ΠΑΡ' ΗΜΩΝ ΔΕ ΕΥΧΗ, ΕΥΛΟΓΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΣΥΓΧΩΡΗΣΙΣ

* * *

Τιμιώτατοι ἀδελφοί Ἀρχιερεῖς καί τέκνα ἐν Κυρίῳ εὐλογημένα,

Εὐδοκία καί χάριτι τοῦ πανοικτίρμονος καί πανδώρου Θεοῦ, διάγοντες ἤδη τήν εὐλογημένην περίοδον τοῦ Κατανυκτικοῦ Τριωδίου, εἰσερχόμεθα αὖριον εἰς τήν Ἁγίαν καί Μεγάλην Τεσσαρακοστήν, εἰς τό στάδιον τῆς παθοκτόνου νηστείας καί τῆς «πανσέπτου ἐγκρατείας», κατά τό ὁποῖον ἀποκαλύπτεται τό βάθος τοῦ πλούτου τῆς Ὁρθόδοξου ἡμῶν Παραδόσεως καί ἡ ἀνύστακτος μέριμνα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας διά τήν πνευματικήν προκοπήν τῶν τέκνων τῆς. Ὡς ὑπενθυμίζει ἡ Ἁγία καί Μεγάλη Σύνοδος τῆς Κρήτης (Ἰούνιος, 2016), «ἡ Ὁρθόδοξος Ἐκκλησία ἀπαρεγκλίτως στοιχοῦσα εἰς τε τά ἀποστολικά θεσπίσματα καί τοὺς συνοδικούς κανόνας καί εἰς τήν καθ' ὅλου πατερικήν παράδοσιν, διεκήρυξε πάντοτε τήν ὑψίστην ἀξίαν τῆς νηστείας διά τόν πνευματικόν βίον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καί τήν σωτηρίαν αὐτοῦ» (*Ἡ σπουδαιότης τῆς νηστείας καί ἡ τήρησις αὐτῆς σήμερον*, § 1).

Τά πάντα εἰς τήν ζωὴν τῆς Ἐκκλησίας ἔχουν ἄσειστον θεολογικόν θεμέλιον καί σωτηριολογικὴν ἀναφοράν. Οἱ ὀρθόδοξοι χριστιανοί ἀσκοῦν τό «κοινόν ἄθλημα» τῆς ἀσκήσεως καί τῆς νηστείας «ἐν παντί εὐχαριστοῦντες» (Θεσσ. Α' ε', 18). Ἡ Ἐκκλησία καλεῖ τά τέκνα τῆς νά διατρέξουν τόν δόλιχον τῶν ἀσκητικῶν γυμνασμάτων ὡς πορείαν πρὸς τό Ἅγιον Πάσχα. Ἀποτελεῖ κεντρικὴν ἐμπειρίαν τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ ζωῆς, ὅτι ὁ γνήσιος ἀσκητισμός δέν εἶναι ποτέ σκυθρωπός, ἀφοῦ διαποτίζεται ἀπὸ τήν προσδοκίαν τῆς ἀναστασίμου εὐφροσύνης. Ἡ ὕμνολογία μας ἀναφέρεται εἰς τό «ἔαρ τῆς νηστείας».

Ἐν τῇ ἐννοίᾳ ταύτῃ, μακρὰν τῶν παγίδων τοῦ νεοπλατωνίζοντος δυϊσμοῦ καί τῆς ἀλλοτριωτικῆς «σωματοκτονίας», ὁ γνήσιος ἀσκητισμός εἶναι ἀδιανόητον νά ἀποβλέπη εἰς τήν ἐξουθένωσιν τοῦ «κακοῦ σώματος» χάριν τοῦ πνεύματος καί τῆς ἀπελευθερώσεως τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκ τῶν βασανιστικῶν δεσμῶν του. Ὅπως τονίζεται, «ἡ ἄσκηση, στήν αὐθεντικὴ ἐκφρασή της, δέν στρέφεται κατά τοῦ σώματος, ἀλλὰ κατά τῶν παθῶν, ἡ ρίζα τῶν ὁποίων εἶναι «πνευματικὴ», ἀφοῦ «πρωτοπαθὴς» εἶναι ὁ νοῦς. Μᾶλλον τό σῶμα δέν εἶναι ὁ μέγας ἀντίπαλος τοῦ ἀσκητῆ».

Ἡ ἀσκητικὴ προσπάθεια ἐπιδιώκει τὴν ὑπέρβασιν τοῦ ἐγωκεντρισμοῦ, χάριν τῆς «οὐ ζητοῦσης τὰ ἑαυτῆς» ἀγάπης, ἄνευ τῆς ὁποίας ὁ ἄνθρωπος παραμένει ἐγκλωβισμένος εἰς τὸν ἑαυτόν του, εἰς τὸ «ἀδηφάγον ἐγώ» καὶ τὰς ἀκορέστους ἐπιθυμίας του. Ὁ ἐγωκεντρικὸς ἄνθρωπος συρρικνώνεται, χάνει τὴν δημιουργικότητά του, κατὰ τὸ ἔξοχον, «ὄ,τι δίνουμε πολλαπλασιάζεται, ὄ,τι κρατᾶμε γιὰ τὸν ἑαυτό μας εἶναι χαμένο». Διὰ τὸν λόγον αὐτόν, ἡ σοφία τῶν Πατέρων καὶ ἡ πείρα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας συνδέουν τὴν περίοδον τῆς νηστείας μετὰ τὴν «δαψίλειαν τῆς ἐλεημοσύνης», μέ ἔργα εὐποΐας καὶ φιλανθρωπίας, τὰ ὁποῖα εἶναι ἔνδειξις ὑπερβάσεως τῆς φιλαυτίας καὶ ὑπαρξιακῆς πληρότητος.

Ἡ ὀλιστικότητα εἶναι ἐν παντί καιρῷ τὸ χαρακτηριστικόν τῆς ζωῆς ἐν Ἐκκλησίᾳ. Λειτουργικὴ ζωὴ, ἄσκησις καὶ πνευματικότης, ποιμαντικὴ μέριμνα καὶ ἐγκόσμιος καλὴ μαρτυρία, εἶναι ἔκφρασις τῆς ἀληθείας τῆς πίστεώς μας, στοιχεῖα ἀλληλένδετα καὶ ἀλληλοσυμπληρούμενα τῆς χριστιανικῆς μας ταυτότητος, μέ κοινόν σημεῖον ἀναφορᾶς καὶ κατεύθυνσιν τὴν Βασιλείαν τῶν Ἑσχάτων καὶ τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ πλήρωσιν καὶ πληρότητα τῆς Θείας Οἰκονομίας. Ἐνῶ ἡ ἐκκλησιαστικὴ ζωὴ εἰς ὅλας τὰς ἐκφάνσεις τῆς ἀντανακλᾶ καὶ εἰκονίζει τὴν ἐρχομένην Βασιλείαν τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος, εἶναι τὸ μυστήριον τῆς Θείας Εὐχαριστίας, ἐκεῖνο τὸ ὁποῖον, ὅπως ὑπογραμμίζει μετ' ἐμφάσεως ὁ προσφάτως ἐκδημήσας πρὸς Κύριον μακαριστὸς Μητροπολίτης Περγάμου Ἰωάννης «ἐκφράζει τὴν Ἐκκλησίαν στὴν πληρότητά της» (*Βασιλείας Θεοῦ ἐκτύπωμα*, Μέγαρον 2013, σ. 59). Ἡ «καθαρά κοινωνία», ἡ ἐκκλησιοποίησις τῆς ὑπάρξεώς μας, ὡς μετοχὴ εἰς τὴν Θεῖαν Εὐχαριστίαν, εἶναι τὸ «τέλος» τῆς νηστείας, ὁ «στέφανος» καὶ τὸ «βραβεῖον» τῶν ἀσκητικῶν ἀγώνων (βλ. Ἰωάννου Χρυσοστόμου, *Εἰς τὸν Ἡσαΐαν Ὁμιλίαι*, στ': *Εἰς τὰ Σεραφεῖμ*, PG 56, 139).

Σήμερον, εἰς ἐποχὴν ἀποϊεροποιήσεως τῆς ζωῆς, ὅπου ὁ ἄνθρωπος «προσδίδει μεγάλη σημασία σέ ἐντελῶς ἀσήμαντα πράγματα», ἡ χριστιανικὴ μας ἀποστολὴ εἶναι ἡ ἔμπρακτος ἀνάδειξις τοῦ ὑπαρξιακοῦ βάθους τοῦ ὀρθοδόξου «τριπτύχου τῆς πνευματικότητος», ὡς ἀδιασπᾶστου ἐνότητος λειτουργικῆς ζωῆς, ἀσκητικοῦ ἠθους καὶ ἀλληλεγγύης, τῆς πεμπτουσίας τῆς ἀξιολογικῆς ἐπαναστάσεως εἰς τὸν χῶρον τοῦ ἠθους καὶ τοῦ πολιτισμοῦ, τὴν ὁποῖαν συγκροτεῖ ἡ πίστις εἰς Χριστόν καὶ ἡ θεοδότητος ἐλευθερία τῶν τέκνων τοῦ Θεοῦ. Θεωροῦμεν ἰδιατέρως σημαντικόν, νὰ ζῶμεν τὴν Ἁγίαν καὶ Μεγάλην Τεσσαρακοστήν ὡς ἀποκάλυψιν καὶ βίωσιν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς νοήματος τῆς ἐλευθερίας «ἡ Χριστὸς ἡμᾶς ἠλευθέρωσε» (Γαλ. ε', 1).

Μέ αὐτὰς τὰς σκέψεις καὶ μέ αἰσθήματα ἀγάπης καὶ τιμῆς, εὐχόμεθα εἰς ὑμᾶς τοὺς Τιμιωτάτους ἐν Χριστῷ ἀδελφούς καὶ εἰς τὰ ἀνά τὴν οἰκουμένην πνευματικὰ τέκνα τῆς Μητρὸς Ἐκκλησίας εὐδρομον τὸ στάδιον τῆς νηστείας, ἐπικαλούμενοι ἐπὶ πάντα ὑμᾶς τὴν χάριν καὶ τὸ ἔλεος τοῦ ἀεὶ εὐφραينوμένου ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀσκητικοῖς ἄθλοις τοῦ λαοῦ Αὐτοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ, Οὗ τὸ κράτος τῆς Βασιλείας εἶη εὐλογημένον καὶ δεδοξασμένον, νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων. Ἀμήν.

Ἁγία καὶ Μεγάλη Τεσσαρακοστή, βγκ΄

† Ὁ Κωνσταντινουπόλεως

διάπυρος πρὸς Θεὸν εὐχέτης πάντων ὑμῶν

Αναγνωσθήτω ἐπ' ἐκκλησίας κατὰ τὴν Κυριακὴν τῆς Τυρινῆς, κς' Φεβρουαρίου, ἀμέσως μετὰ τὸ Ἱερὸν Εὐαγγέλιον.