

## LENT IN OUR LIFE

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An excerpt from his book titled *GREAT LENT: Journey to Pascha*

What could be not only a normal but a real impact of Lent on our existence? This existence (do we need to recall it) is very different from the one people led when all these services, hymns, canons, and prescriptions were composed and established. One lived then in a relatively small, mainly rural community within one organically Orthodox world; the very rhythm of one's life was shaped by the Church. Now, however, we live in an enormous urban, technological society which is pluralistic in its religious beliefs, secularistic in its worldview, and in which we Orthodox constitute an insignificant minority. Lent is no longer "visible" as it was, let us say, in Russia or in Greece. Our question thus is a very real one; how can we – besides introducing one or two "symbolical" changes into our daily life—keep Lent?

It is obvious, for example, that for the great majority of the faithful the daily attendance at Lenten worship is out of the question. They continue to go to church on Sundays, but, as we already know, on Sundays of Lent the Liturgy, at least in its externals, does not reflect Lent and thus one can hardly have even a "feel" of the Lenten type of worship, the main means by which the spirit of Lent is communicated to us. And since Lent is in no way reflected in the culture to which we belong, it is no wonder then that ours today is mainly a *negative* understanding of Lent—as a season when certain different things such as meat and fats, dancing and entertainment are forbidden. The popular question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" is a good summary of that common negative approach. In "positive" terms, Lent is viewed as the time when we must fulfill the annual "obligation" of Confession and Communion "...and not later than Palm Sunday..." as I have read in a parish bulletin. This obligation having been fulfilled, the rest of Lent seems to lose all positive meaning.

Thus it is evident that there has developed a rather deep discrepancy between, on the one hand, the spirit or the "theory" of Lent, which we tried to outline on the basis of Lenten worship, and on the other hand, its common and popular understanding which is very often shared and supported not only by laity but also by clergy themselves. For it is always

easier to reduce something spiritual to something formal rather than search for the spiritual behind the formal. We can say without any exaggeration that although Lent is still “observed”, it has lost much of its impact on our lives, has ceased to be that bath of repentance and renewal which it is meant to be in the liturgical and spiritual teaching of the Church. But then, can we rediscover it; make it again a spiritual power in the daily reality of our existence? The answer to this question depends primarily, and I would say almost exclusively, on whether or not we are willing to *take Lent seriously*. However, new or different the conditions in which we live today, however real the difficulties and obstacles erected by our modern world, *none* of them is an *absolute* obstacle, none of them makes Lent “impossible.” The real root of the progressive loss by Lent of its impact on our lives lies deeper. It is our conscious or unconscious reduction of religion to the superficial nominalism and symbolism which is precisely the way to by-pass and to “explain away” the seriousness of religion’s demands on our lives, religion’s demand for commitment and effort. This reduction, we must add, is in a way peculiar to Orthodoxy. Western Christians, Catholics or Protestants, when faced with what they consider as “impossible” would rather change religion itself, “adjust” it to new conditions and thus make it “practicable.” Quite recently, for example, we have seen the Roman Church first reduce fasting to a bare minimum and then practically dispose of it altogether. With just and righteous indignation, we denounce such an “adjustment” as a betrayal of Christian tradition and as minimizing Christian faith. And indeed, it is the truth and the glory of Orthodoxy that it does not “adjust” itself to and compromise with the lower standards, that it does not make Christianity “easy”. It is the glory of *Orthodoxy*, but certainly *not* of us Orthodox people. Not today, not even yesterday, but long ago we have found a way to reconcile the absolute demands of the Church and our human weakness, and this not only without “losing face” but with additional reasons for self-righteousness and good conscience. The method consists of fulfilling these demands symbolically, and symbolic nominalism permeates today our whole religious life. Thus, for example, we would not even think of revising our liturgy and its monastic regulations—God forbid! —we will simply keep calling a one-hour service an “All-Night Vigil” and proudly explain that it is the same service the monks of the Lavra of St. Sabbas served in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. In regard to Lent, instead of asking fundamental questions—

“What is fasting?” or “What is Lent?”—we satisfy ourselves with Lenten symbolism. In church magazines and bulletins appear recipes for “delicious Lenten dishes,” and a parish might even raise some additional money by means of a well-advertised “tasty Lenten dinner”. So much in our churches is explained symbolically as interesting, colorful, and amusing customs and traditions, as something which connects us not so much with God and a new life in Him but with the past and the customs of our forefathers, that it becomes increasingly difficult to discern behind this religious folklore the utter seriousness of religion. Let me stress that there is nothing wrong in the various customs themselves. When they appeared they were the means and the expressions of a society *taking religion seriously*; they were not symbols, but life itself. What happened, however, was that as life changed and became less and less shaped by religion in its totality, a few customs survived as symbols of a way of life no longer lived. And what survived was that which on the one hand is most colorful and on the other hand the least difficult. The spiritual danger here is that little by little one begins to understand religion itself as a system of symbols and customs rather than to understand the latter as a challenge to spiritual renewal and effort. More effort goes into preparing Lenten dishes or Easter baskets than into fasting and participation in the spiritual reality of Easter. This means that as long as customs and traditions are not connected again with the total religious worldview which produced them, as long as symbols are not taken *seriously*, the Church will remain disconnected from life and have no power over life. Instead of symbolizing our “rich heritage”, we must start integrating it into our real life.

To *take Lent seriously* means then that we will consider it first of all on the deepest possible level—as a spiritual challenge which requires a response, a decision, a plan, a continuous effort. It is for this reason, as we know, that the weeks of preparation for Lent were established by the Church. This is the time for the response, for the decision and the planning. And the best and easiest way here is to follow the Church’s guidance—be it only by meditating on the five Gospel themes offered to us on the five Sundays of the pre-Lenten season: That of desire (Zacchaeus), of humility (Publican and Pharisee), of the return from exile (Prodigal Son), of the judgment (Last Judgment) and of forgiveness (Forgiveness Sunday). These Gospel lessons are not merely to be listened to in church; the whole point is that they are to be “taken home” and meditated upon in terms of *my* life, *my* family

situation, *my* professional obligations, *my* concern for material things, *my* relation to the concrete human beings with whom I live. If to this meditation one adds the prayer of that pre-Lenten season, “Open to me the gates of repentance, O Giver of Life. . .,” and Psalm 137—“By the rivers of Babylon . . .”—one begins to understand what it means to “feel with the Church” how a liturgical season colors the daily life. It is also a good time to read a religious book. The purpose of this reading is not only to increase our knowledge about religion; it is mainly to purify our mind from all that which usually fills it. It is simply incredible how crowded our minds are with all kinds of cares, interests, anxieties, and impressions, and how little control we have over that crowd. Reading a religious book, concentrating our attention on something entirely different from the usual contents of our thinking, creates by itself another mental and spiritual atmosphere. These are not “recipes”—there may be other ways of preparing oneself for Lent. The important point is that during this pre-Lenten season we look at Lent as it were from a distance, as something coming to us or even perhaps sent to us by God Himself, as a chance for a change, for renewal, for deepening, and that we take that forthcoming chance *Seriously*, so that on Forgiveness Sunday when we leave our home for Vespers we may be ready to make ours—be it only in a small way—the words of the *Great Prokeimenon* which will inaugurate Lent:

Turn not away Thy face from Thy servant,  
For I am afflicted . . . .