

GREAT LENT

Do not tell me:
I fasted so many days,
I didn't eat this or that
I didn't drink wine
I went in unattractive clothing;
but tell us
have you gone from angry to silent,
from fierce to good-natured.
(Saint John Chrysostom)



Great Lent or Honorable Fast is the most important fasting season in the Orthodox Church. It truly became the prototype for all other fasting (lenten) seasons in the ascetic and liturgical life of the Orthodox Church. Since ancient times, Great Lent began to take form in the consciousness of the first Christian communities who cherished the remembrance of the forty-day fast of our Savior Jesus Christ. Namely, the Gospel according to Matthew points out that after His baptism in the Jordan River, the Lord withdrew to the desert of Judaea, fasting for forty days and nights. In this way, the Lord was preparing Himself for the upcoming mission among the Jews. Doing divine acts of love and compassion towards everyone, the Lord emphasized the importance of fasting and said “when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face” (Mt. 6:16-17).

It is necessary to note that before Christ's baptism in the Jordan River, Saint John the Baptist, who was in the desert of Judaea, called people from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas to repent for the Kingdom of heaven was at hand—that is, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Mt. 3:2).

Jesus, who loves mankind, pointed out to his disciples the significance of fasting and prayer on the day he healed the possessed child, showing compassion to the father of this child, he said: “This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting (Mt. 17:21).

The institution of the fast, however, wasn't unknown in the Old Testament. The idea of fasting originates from the Jewish practice. God the Father, Al-mighty, the Creator, gave only one commandment in the Garden of Eden. He commanded and said to Adam, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Genesis 2:16-17).

Adam and Eve broke the commandment given by God and paid for their free choice by being expelled from Paradise. With this exile, Adam and Eve deprived themselves from communion with God, the source of life and every good.

Lent, therefore, originated as an expression of the repentant attitude that is necessary to establish peace with God and that it is important to achieve peace with yourself and your neighbors. Moses' law prescribes only one public and very strict annual lent on the day of Reconciliation (Lev. 16:29, 31; 23:27; Numbers 29:7). In order to show humility before God and emphasize repentance of one's sins, the clothes were torn and ashes was sprinkled on top of the head.



Early Christians began to respect the events of Christ's life described in the Gospel very early. The commemoration of the event of Christ's suffering and resurrection from the dead was especially vivid. Observing these holy days as days of repentance, they began to fast very quickly and to pray more intensively on those days. Over time, this idea was formed into one uninterrupted period—the period of Great and Holy Lent, which concluded with the commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ.

Great Lent begins on the Monday after Cheesefare Sunday and lasts until the Friday before Lazarus Saturday. Our Holy Church linked this lenten season to the Holy Week fast, in commemoration of the sufferings and death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT – OF ORTHODOXY

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD AND THE EVENT OF THE FALL

The magnificent description of the creation of the world and man as the crown of creation is an essential part of the liturgical narrative of the first week of Great Lent. This detail was not inserted without reason, because the world came to life through the miraculous event of creation. God called all creation to be in communion with God. During the vespereal Liturgy, the faithful are reminded again and again of the event of the creation of all things visible and invisible by the living and uncreated God. One hears the concepts of heaven, earth, darkness over the abyss, the hovering Spirit of God, light, firmament, dry land, fruitful trees... That which did not exist in any form comes to life, and in such a magnificent and perfect way!



During the first week of Lent, however, the Church also reminds us of the event of the Fall, whose main characters are our ancestors Adam and Eve. The fall brought a curse to Adam and Eve, and through them, suffering to the entire human race. The loss of the grace of God is a visible indicator of the Fall. Man becomes evermore distant from the heavens and attached to the earth. By separating from God, he renounces the love with which the Creator showered him and becomes subject to sin and bad deeds.

This news, therefore, comes to full expression in the first days of Great Lent, and it highlights the reason for establishing the institution of Lent. Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, all creation became subject to de-cay. Man, who was created in the image of God, neglects his original role—the humble offering of all creation to God the Creator.

During the first week of Lent, instructive words from the book of the proph-et Isaiah and from the Book of Solomon are heard. Isaiah's verses empha-size the need to overcome the ego, that is, to strengthen our inner capaci-ties against sin in any form. The holy prophet Isaiah points out that it is nec-essary to overcome the cunningness of human nature and notes that man is a being who has the ability to learn to do good deeds. On the other hand, the words of the wise Solomon echo that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord! The poet encourages us, with our passions and fallen hu-man nature, to enter the arena with fear of the Lord and courage and to emerge victoriously from that internal struggle! Church hymnography em-phasizes that man should repent, cleanse and mourn for his sins.

SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

The first Sunday of Great Lent is called the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

Historically speaking, every Sunday of Orthodoxy is a commemoration of an event from the history of the Church when in 843 the veneration of icons was officially accepted into church practice during the reign of Empress Theodora and Patriarch Methodius of Constantinople. In the same year, the Affirmation of the Faith, a solemn confession of the Fathers on the teaching about holy icons, was compiled. This solemn document is read in all Orthodox churches on Sunday of Orthodoxy.



ICONS AND THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION

The question of the veneration of icons is primarily a theological question, which describes God, Who is indescribable in His divine nature. Thanks to the event of Christ's birth, God appeared to the world and became visible, giving the world the opportunity to know God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks to the fact that He physically lived an earthly life, it is beneficial for our salvation to have a drawing of His image. Iconography in its essence is public teaching, as well as the preaching of the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Fathers also made a connection between the event of the creation of man and the veneration of icons. The fact that God created man in His own image and likeness shows us that the act of painting icons is a divine act. This unique experience of depicting the image of Christ, the Mother of God and the Saints of our Holy Orthodox Church was confirmed at the Seventh Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 778.

TROPARION, TONE 2:

We venerate Your most pure image, O Good One, and ask forgiveness of our transgressions, O Christ God. Of Your own will You were pleased to ascend the Cross in the flesh to deliver Your creatures from bondage to the enemy. Therefore with thanksgiving we cry aloud to You: You have filled all with joy, O our Savior, by coming to save the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why is Great Lent the most important fasting season of the Church?
2. How should one experience the event of Christ's Passion and the Resurrection?
3. What is the essence of the message regarding the veneration of icons?

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