

A Practical Journey Through Lent

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A practical guide toward increasing our spirituality throughout the Great Lent.

Lent is a time of the year filled with spirituality, prophecies, prayers, liturgies, fasting, metanoias (prostrations), repentance, charity, solemn hymns, and prayers for the sick. It is the storehouse of spirituality for the whole year. It is a time basically to be in touch with Our Creator. Who is Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? It is a time to know Christ. What does it mean to know Christ?

Saint Paul tells us in Philippians 3:10, “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.” This is what knowing Christ means. Someone may say, ‘resurrection, suffering and death, is this what knowing Christ is all about? What misery and sorrow, I don’t want to have anything to do with suffering and death, I just want to enjoy life!’ What a poor fellow he truly is, to have missed the true meaning of life.

Saint Paul makes it clear here that to know Christ, we must share in His sufferings, be conformed to His death and then we can realize the power of His Resurrection and His victory over death. This is the journey of Lent that we wish to travel through today. I want each and every one of you to take this time in your life as a time of renewal, of spiritual awakening out of deep sleep. Let us revitalize our spirits during the 55-day period of Lent and Pascha Week.

It is a time for rebuilding!

Seven Features of the Lenten Journey

1. The prayers and liturgies Lent is known as a period of intense prayers.

Liturgies are held every day in many churches. The liturgies are distinguished by being later in the day. This is to have a period of total abstinence from food, it is an ascetic practice. It gives us time to contemplate on matters of the spirit, to concentrate on the more important matters of life, our life with Christ. These liturgies unite us with Christ. We partake of His Holy Body and Blood which purify us from all iniquity.

We can then lead a life of purity, holiness and peace with Our Lord. In partaking of the Holy Mysteries, they protect us from evil and help us to fight and resist Satan and his tricks and temptations. But we have to be vigilant and remember that now we have Christ inside of us, abiding in us and we in Him. So that when sin looks so delicious in front of our eyes, we remember that we have something sweeter than honey that can satisfy our every need and that is the person of Our Lord Jesus.

The Mighty God, the King of kings, the Saviour and lover of mankind, the Philanthropic One! He can save us from the hands of Satan, and Him alone. Saint Peter reminds us saying, “be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” (1 Peter 5:8) Think of how many times he has attempted to devour you and how Our Lord has saved you!

Think of how many of your friends that used to come to church and praise God are no longer sitting next to you in the pews, because Satan has devoured them!

Time for prayer

This is a time of prayer, intense prayer for your own salvation as well as praying for your friends that could have been enjoying the fellowship with Jesus, that sweet Name in which we find our comfort and rest. Learn what the power of prayer can do for you, it can change you, the way you think and speak.

How can you be a man of prayer and then go out and blaspheme, or swear or use dirty language.

The spiritual vacuum

There is a spiritual vacuum that young people are living in today. There is emptiness, a big hole that needs to be filled with prayer. Instead of using our tongues to sing after mindless songs of this world as many teenagers do.

The songs of today These songs are far away from God, words that are full of blasphemy, full of Eros – sensual love that wants to take and not to give. Words that are full of pessimism, full of filthy language, full of no meaning, just words. Let us use our tongues to praise God to thank Him and to worship Him and to wrestle with Him to lead us to a true Christian life.

Our Relationship with God

Let us build this personal relationship with God, to make Him our best friend, believe me there is no one like Him that can give us rest. He said this Himself, “Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) This is where our rest is, it is in Him alone. Do we believe Him? do we believe in His words? Or have we heard them so many times that we take them for granted and do not pay any attention to them. Let us interact with God, speak with Him, listen to Him, form a relationship with Him and see the turnaround that will happen. God changes lives my brothers and sisters, only if we let Him in.

In His own Words

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” (Revelation 3:20)

What a great honour this is for every Christian, a wonderful invitation to dine with the Lord, to share with Him, have fellowship with Him and to partake of Him. Let prayer change and affect your life both through the liturgy and through your own private prayers between you and Your Saviour. As the Lord reminds us, “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matthew 6:6)

Shut you door and pray

Shut your door to all the pleasures of the world that will keep you away from Christ, that will entice you to do evil, that will tell you that you are totally free without limits or rules and that encourage anarchy. This is the way that youth are heading in today’s culture towards anarchy, lawlessness, turmoil, and chaos. We can overcome all of this slackness in youth culture through the help of prayer and a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The Church Readings

The nature of the texts read during Lent is different from the rest of the year. First of all, before the gospel of Matins there are prophecies that are read from the Old Testament. They speak about God’s relationship with Israel and how He rescued them so many times from the hands of their enemies. They also speak about the events in the earthly life of Our Lord Jesus Christ leading up to His death and resurrection.

The Great Lent

Lent is divided into seven weeks, as Passion Week is regarded as a separate week and in days of old was celebrated separately once every thirty three years. The Church has placed a powerful program of reading during Lent. This program which was organized by the early fathers of the Church through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit takes us through a spiritual journey of repentance and leads us to the joy of the Resurrection. It also leads us to a rich fellowship with Christ in His fast.

Our Lord Leads the Way

We must not forget that it was Our Lord Who fasted this fast for us at first. Fasting for forty days and forty nights, so He certainly participates with us during Lent and strengthens us. In the story of Saint Mary the Egyptian, the monks used to go out into the wilderness of the desert and leave their monasteries. This was in order for them to be in complete solitude with the Lord and to enjoy His company alone.

The teaching of catechumens

This period of Lent was used by the Church for the teaching of catechumens, that is, those that were preparing to enter into the faith. It was a concentrated teaching program, and hence the readings of the scriptures were appropriate also for this purpose to lead them to repentance. This led to their baptism at Easter, as baptism is dying and being raised with Christ. The procession that is conducted today for the newly baptised person was the procession of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

An Outline of the Sunday Gospels during Lent

Preparation Sunday - Matthew 6:1-18

“But you, when you pray, go into your room... shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place... when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face... Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” The journey begins from within, “go into your room”, search inside yourself. Look inwardly and see what is happening in your life. Close the door that leads you to death, and that is the corruption and immorality that is in the world. Spend time with God alone in solitude, worship Him and prepare for your journey.

The First Sunday – Matthew 6:19-33

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat... nor about your body, what you will put on... Therefore do not worry about tomorrow.” This gospel speaks about surrendering one’s life totally to Our Heavenly Father. This is what faith is all about. We have to trust in His words that He will provide our every need. Instead, we calculate everything and worry about bills that have not been paid, or failing the exam or losing our sports game. We need to have total reliance on God and believe Him one hundred percent. He is faithful and honest to deliver what He has promised us. A life of submission is what is needed, but at the same time we need to do our part and be diligent in whatever task is at hand.

The Second Sunday – Matthew 4:1-11 (The Temptation of Christ)

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’” This reminds us that our fight is not against flesh and blood as Saint Paul tells us, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12) If Satan had the courage to even tempt Our Lord, then how much more careful must we be?

We, who are weak and made of dust must use all of the spiritual means that God has given to us to protect ourselves

from the enemy in order to be able to overcome him. Sometimes we just let him take over completely and destroy us, we let evil thoughts enter our minds and enjoy them until they come to fruition. Look at how Our Lord answered Satan each time, “It is written...” The word of God frightens Satan and protects us like a fortified city. We must put on the whole armour of God as Saint Paul also reminds us by saying, “Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” (Ephesians 6:11)

The Third Sunday – Luke 15:11-32 (The Prodigal Son)

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” This is the gospel of repentance and the return to God. In this parable Our Lord Jesus Christ shows to us the low level that Satan wants to place us in. It is the level of desiring to eat of the pods of the swine. Satan rejoices to see the sons of God perishing and under his control, and not having the power to rise. He wants to keep them living in evil and to wallow in sin. The clever son, as we sometimes call the prodigal son, did not rely on his own power. He came to himself and realized his weak state and received power from Christ Who gave him the strength to return and repent and live a life of holiness. He would in no way ever think of returning back to this evil state, this is true repentance. We must learn from this clever son, who knew the way of life and continued in it without return.

Another important lesson that we can learn from this parable is never to allow Satan to make us believe that there is no hope. He will attempt to sell this idea to us, and say to us, “how can you ever think of going to church or meeting your confession father while you are leading such a wretched life, just wait until things improve.” You must realize that your situation will not improve unless you repent and confess your sins to God and to your confession father, who will give you the absolution as God’s steward.

The Fourth Sunday – John 4:1-42 (The Samaritan Woman)

“Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.” Verses 13 and 14 in this passage are words that we need to place in front of our eyes on a daily basis and always come back to them. Where do we obtain our nourishment from? Many obtain it from resources that do not satisfy and fulfil. This woman was an example of this, as she searched for a false unfulfilling nourishment in the pleasures of this world, and she was never satisfied with her sinful life. Since she was searching in the wrong place, that is why she could not comprehend what Our Lord Jesus Christ was telling her at first. Water that completely satisfies you and fountains springing up to everlasting life? Yes, she could not understand this, until she realised that she was talking with the Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

He is the One Who can grant true nourishment. The Word of God is our source of nourishment and satisfaction. It is only when the Samaritan woman realized this that she was able to lead others also to be nourished by the Logos, the

source of all goodness and life, Christ, Our life and hope.

The Fifth Sunday John 5:1-18 (The healing of the Paralytic)

“Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up ...Rise, take up your bed and walk ...See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.” These words, “I have no man,” ring very loudly today, as there are millions of people around the world who cannot find someone to show them the way, the way to salvation and repentance in Christ Jesus Our Lord. Will you be someone that can stretch out their hands in love to someone who is in need of being healed from sin that cripples one’s feelings, actions and thoughts? Sin does disable us, and makes us not want to move or walk towards God. Baptism washes away sin and gives us a new beginning and a new life in Christ. It is the washing of regeneration, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit we become consecrated to God. We become His, His special people who are devoted to Him.

The Sixth Sunday John 9:1-41 (The Healing of the Man born Blind)

“I was blind and now I see.” This is the Sunday of spiritual enlightenment, the Sunday of Baptism. Baptism is washing or dyeing, a complete immersion. It is death and resurrection with Christ. This Baptism is renewed through repentance and confession, where a person can receive remission of sins.

The Seventh Sunday John 12:12-19 (Palm Sunday)

“Hosanna! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ The King of Israel!” The entry of the triumphal King into Jerusalem, is a day of great glory that is founded in the meekness of Christ entering on a colt. We want Him to reign over our hearts and to enter with Him into the heavenly Jerusalem.

3. The Church Hymns – the Words and the Hymnology

In the hymns of this season, we see how the Holy Spirit has inspired all of them. The tunes are all solemn and truly give the right effect to lead one to repentance. If we take for example the tune of “Our Father Who art in heaven (Coptic: Je Peniout Et Khen Nifiowi)...,” we can feel that this is very suitable for the season. It invokes feelings of contrition and unworthiness inside of us.

If we compare this tune with “Christ Is Risen” (Coptic: Ekchristos Anesti) which is sung at Easter, we can see the great contrast from solemnity to great joy. The effect of the Words on the spirit Not just the hymnology but also the words have a deep effect on the human spirit. Take for example the words of the verses that are sung before the litany of the Sunday Gospels: “Our Lord Jesus Christ fasted for us forty days and forty nights and saved us from our sins. We also must fast with purity and righteousness and pray whilst praying and saying: The effect of the Words on the spirit I have sinned, I have sinned My Lord Jesus forgive me, for there is no servant without sin and no Master without

forgiveness. Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy Kingdom come, for thine is the glory forever.”

It is clear from the words, that they are words of compunction, of one with a broken heart, standing humbly in the presence of God.

The Effect on us

The hymnology and the words go together to create an atmosphere of repentance and rich spirituality. This hymnology effects the inner depths of the soul. Usually, once a person becomes accustomed to it, it lingers in his memory for a long time even after Easter. He still remembers those days of repentance and solitude with the Lord and longs for their return and hopefully their continuance in his life during the holy fifty days after Easter and beyond.

4. Repentance – Metanoia (Prostrations)

The Lenten season as we have said is also deeply associated with the life of repentance and purity. I urge you all to read the book titled “The Life of Repentance and Purity” by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III. I had the blessing of translating and publishing this wonderful work in 1991 before completely dedicating my life to God. This book could change your life and lead you to see spirituality in a different light.

Metanoia

Repentance comes from the Greek word ‘Metanoia.’

‘Meta’ means change and

‘nous’ means mind.

So, ‘Metanoia’ is the changing of one’s mind.

This is what Saint Paul speaks about in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” We see that Metanoias (prostrations) play an important part in Lent.

As they help us in the renewing and changing process. During the weekdays of Lent there are certain metanoias performed whilst saying the following words: The priest says while bowing: “We bow our knees’ The congregation reply: “Have mercy upon us O God the Father, the Pantocrator (Almighty)

Priest: “We stand and then bow our knees”

Congregation: "Have mercy upon us O God Our Saviour"

Priest: "We stand again and then bow our knees"

Congregation: "Have mercy upon us O God and have mercy."

We ask for God's mercy to strengthen us to succeed in the renewing process and to be able to change our way of thinking to correspond to God's way.

5. Fasting and Abstinence – Helping the Poor and Needy

The true meaning of fasting is not in the type of food we eat during Lent. This is only physical, but more importantly is our spirits. How do they benefit from fasting? Do we fast from our sins? Do we make the extra effort to resist sin and Satan? What is unique about our fast? Remember not only Christians fast, but so do Buddhists and Muslims, some people fast for political reasons also. But what makes our fast unique?

One author states that "Adam broke the fast in Paradise by eating of the forbidden fruit and this is how man's original sin is revealed to us. Christ, the new Adam, begins by fasting. Adam was tempted and he succumbed to temptation; Christ was tempted and He overcame temptation. So fasting is not just a mere obligation or custom but it is connected with the very mystery of life and death, of salvation and damnation."

Abstinence from food

During our fast we also practice a period of total abstinence of food, let us use this time to remember the poor in Egypt and around the world. Be thankful to Our gracious God for what He has given us of blessings. Learn to be content with what we have. Pray for the poor and see what positive things we can do for them. We must also use this fast not only to get rid of our beloved sins but also to work at attaining new virtues in our life. Virtues of joy, love, peace, gratitude, and chastity, just to name a few.

6. Unction of the Sick

During Lent also usually the sacrament of the 'Unction of the Sick' is performed in many homes and also on the concluding Friday of Lent before the Liturgy. So, this is not only a time of remembering the poor but also the sick and indeed all of those in need of our prayers and help. Our Lord said, "for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me. Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you drink? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to you? And the King will answer and say to them, Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of

these My brethren, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:34-40)

Remember Others

During such period of fasting do not be selfish and just think of yourself, but think of those who are less fortunate than you and lend a helping hand. It may be something as simple as helping someone with some homework in a particular subject that you are good at or buying some groceries for an elderly person at your church or going to visit them in hospital when they are ill. Use your talents for the glory of God and His Church.

7. *Spirituality during Lent*

- Do not let Lent go past without something changing in your life for the better.
- Spiritual reading, the Bible, personal and communal prayers, charity, and fasting will help you store up spiritual treasures for the year ahead.
- Use your time wisely and do not waste it in idle matters of little or no use.
- Put the use of television, radio and magazines to a minimum.
- Use this time to read spiritual material and to pray.

May the blessing of the Great Lent be with you all and strengthen you to renew your thinking and to be transformed and not to be conformed to this world and its god who is Satan.