

## Lenten Season – A Time for Renewal

Each year we are asked to participate in the Lenten Season. Why? Because God is an angry God and wants us to deprive ourselves? Some people think so. But, no; just the opposite. God is a loving and patient God who desires not the death of sinners, but that we should turn and live and follow Him.

Lent is not easy, but then again, it was not meant to be. Recently, I read a description of Lent penned by Sister Mary Rose McGready, founder of Covenant House, a Roman Catholic shelter for troubled and homeless children. Here is what she had to say in reference to the tragic street kids she sees:

I am convinced that every year, God sends me one special kid to remind me of what Lent is all about.

I mean, Lent is all about self-examination, and things we must ask ourselves, and reckoning, and looking in the mirror to see if we like what's staring back at us.

I'm not the world's biggest fan of Lent, believe me. In fact, I really don't like it. It is not something we are supposed to like, I guess.

It's time to reflect on how we use the goods of the world, and how we deal with our relationships. It's a time to think back if we are really trying to live a life of love, a time to look under the hood of our souls to make sure everything's running all right and see where the defects are.

Lent is also about resolutions to turn our lives around, and then begin the painful process of dealing with those resolutions.

Easy?

It's not, and it is not supposed to be. It's not easy spending forty days staring into the mirror, scrutinizing, writing checklists, grading performance. It's never easy asking ourselves if we're really being as good as we want to be, as virtuous, as steadfast, as understanding. But it's a good time for us, I think. Lent is the one time when we are most in touch with God.

*Lent is the one time when we are most in touch with God.* Yes, it is! And, nothing can compare to being in touch with God. As St Peter tells Jesus: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." [John 6:68] Or as St John stated: "...that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us [i.e., the Apostles], and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." [I John 1:3]

Fellowship with God starting now and continuing into the Kingdom is the key to our happiness, the bedrock on which our faith is based. With it we can manage all the slings and arrows that come our way, knowing that God is with us. Holding steadfast to our faith gets us through life's uncertainties and demands and troubles. Yet, the set-backs we experience, the health issues we face, and the disappointments and betrayals we endure can erode our confidence in God.

That is why Lent is such a special time of year: a time to re-charge our batteries, a time to re-light the flame of our faith, a time to put on Christ. We can only do so with God's grace and

mercy, and we can only begin this process by participating in Lenten opportunities and expectations. What are they?

They are the same each year: the ascetical practices the Church provides – fasting, prayer, alms giving, weekly worship services – all of which expect us to turn down the volume of our lives. Yes, we cannot truly fast, pray, attend worship services, do good deeds if we continue to lead busy distracting lives. We need to turn off the television set, reduce the hours on the internet, and increase our quiet time to have time to look into the mirror as Sister Mary Rose suggests. Rather than watching one more television program, spend the time reading the daily Scripture lessons and reflecting on them. Rather than going out for another meal, spend the time making and sharing a Lenten meal with the rest of the family. Rather than going to a movie read a book by an Orthodox saint or theologian. In short, spend time with God quietly.

The Reverend Father Alexander Schmemmann in his book Great Lent: Journey to Pascha speaks about Lent as a period of Bright Sadness. We are to reflect on the shortcomings of our lives acknowledging that we often “miss the mark” of the Beatitudes – Blessed are the pure in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness sake, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the ones persecuted for righteousness sake – and become saddened; saddened because we do not always live up to these expectations. Yet, at the same time we acknowledge that we are in communion with a gracious, forgiving, compassionate God who is ever ready to welcome us back to Him as He did the Prodigal Son. Further, Lent is Bright because we struggle in our journey to the joy and wonder of the Empty Tomb and Christ’s Resurrection.

Schmemmann recalls that in Tsarist Russia the theatres and courts closed during Lent as the entire country prepared for Holy Week and the Passion of Christ. His mother locked the piano to allow time to read Scripture and good books and to reflect on progress toward becoming more Christ-like. It was a sad time, but also one of joy and brightness knowing that the end of the Lenten journey is the Risen Christ.

We Orthodox keep the sadness and the brightness in healthy tension. We live with ambiguity and with the mystery of God working in us and through us, knowing that He loves us and wants us to walk with Him at all times. We know our shortcomings. We know we must deny our lusts and addictions. We know what we need to do to keep Christ’s commandments. More importantly, we know God is there to help us. “...without Me you can do nothing, “Christ told His Apostles [John 15:5], and St Paul reminds us: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” [Phil 4:13]

Not only do we have God on our side, we have our fellow parishioners – other people struggling with their passions and demons, many of whom give us courage to stay steadfast. We help each other on our journeys to Pascha.

Like the early American pioneers who traveled West they did not go it alone – that would be foolishness. Rather, they went with family and friends, all of whom contributed to dealing with the journey’s hardships. We are the same. When we attend a weekday service and see others, we take comfort knowing others are on the same journey. They keep us on track. We encourage them and they encourage us. We taste the fellowship about which St John tells us is ours.

Yes, Lent is a time for renewal – to renew our souls, to renew our faith, to renew our commitment to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In their company and the company of saints, we are refreshed and invigorated. We are the Royal Priesthood, we belong to the community of saints.

Let us take this Lenten Season to reflect on our lives and enjoy the company of the Holy Ones of God.