

CATECHETICAL ENCYCLICAL
ON THE OPENING OF GREAT LENT
+ **B A R T H O L O M E W**

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 you

Beloved brothers and children in the Lord,

With the grace and loving kindness of God, tomorrow we enter the arena of Holy and Great Lent, the most suitable period for the soul—our own soul—to turn toward the Lord.

This period is one of constant contrition before the mystery of God that daily unfolds before us, the mystery of our salvation. This is why the opportunity granted to us with the Sacred Fast has a special characteristic: the **renewal** and **vigilance** of the soul that is called for during this time filled with divine exhortation and sanctity to become aware of the ephemeral and material, while gradually being transferred to the eternal and spiritual.

Symbolically and summarily, the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete addresses its author as well as every soul troubled and distressed by the temptations and distractions of this life. Conscious of the burden carried by a soul wounded by sin, St. Andrew cries out with anguish: "My soul, my soul, arise; why do you sleep?" This **cry** leads to the **realization** of vanity and the inexpressible fear of death: "The end is near and [my soul] will be troubled." Before the unexpected end of life that comes "like a thief in the night," the illumined Cretan poet invites himself and every soul suffering and consumed by the fear of insecurity to "awaken in order that Christ our God, who is ever present and fills all things, may take care of us."

The Orthodox patristic teaching calls each of us, during this period of struggle, to recognize "who we are, where we are, and where we are headed." We are called to realize the vanity of this temporary life and repent for all that we have hitherto done "in knowledge or in ignorance, in word or deed, in action and in all our senses" contrary to the Gospel of Christ and the law of grace. Only then shall we find mercy and grace; and only then will the Lord, who knows hearts and minds as well as the innermost secrets and thoughts of human beings, take care of us and forgive our unjust thoughts that lead us to vain and useless deeds.

The struggle that lies before us culminates in **vigilance**, **renewal** and **repentance**. Through **repentance**, namely by coming to know our condition, and through confession, our life is crowned with "forgiveness of sins, communion of the Holy Spirit, and fullness of the heavenly kingdom." This **renewal** is identified with the **conscience** of the repentant soul (see 2 Cor. 1.12 and Rom. 2.15) and is a **gift** of God.

Brothers and children in the Lord,

We Orthodox Christians are called to live the period of Holy and Great Lent as a time of conscientious renewal and vigilance, as an eternal moment of our Orthodox identity. That is to say, we are called to live and experience Christ Himself, to love and experience

ecclesiastically and spiritually. For it is only through our life in Christ that we have the possibility to renew our conscience and ascend to the level of true freedom and the infallible criteria for our consolation and salvation.

At the opening of this blessed period, the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Great Church of Christ spiritually visit every Orthodox Christian soul that labors without consolation and is laden by the values and pleasures of the flesh and this world; we travel with and pray to “the King of kings and Lord of lords, who comes to be slaughtered and given as food to the faithful”: O Lord, deem worthy all Orthodox faithful in peace and contrition of heart, that they may journey through this sacred period and the arena that opens up before us, “granting grace and strength to all, that they may reach their goal and courageously walk the way to the festive day of Your Resurrection in order that they may be crowned with joy and ceaselessly give praise.” (Poem of Theodore, Triodion)

We bless all of you paternally, beloved and faithful children of the Mother Church. And united with you in prayer and intercession, we invoke upon all the power of the precious and life-giving Cross, through the intercessions of our Lady Theotokos, the holy angels and all the saints, so that all of us may be worthy of our calling to live as Orthodox Christians and thus enjoy the delight and glory of our Lord’s Resurrection. To Him belong the might, thanksgiving, honor, power and glory, to the ages of ages. Amen.

Holy and Great Lent 2017
+ **Bartholomew of Constantinople**
Your fervent supplicant before God

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