

February 1 - Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (First Sunday of Triodion)
2 Timothy 3:10-15

Let Us Be Apostolic: 2 Timothy 3:10-15, especially vss. 10-11: *“But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions. . . .”* During the Divine Liturgy, after the oblation of bread and wine is offered to our Lord and His peace is extended to all, we confess the symbol of faith: the Nicene Creed. We affirm therein our belief in “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”

In today’s epistle, Saint Paul calls upon us to stand up for our apostolic birthright in three specific ways. First, we embrace the apostles’ message from the heart; second, we are to adopt a manner of living worthy of the apostles’ standard; and finally, we must be willing to pay the price for being faithful to the apostles’ truth.

Saint Paul states that we practice the faith of the apostles when we “have carefully followed my doctrine [and] manner of life” (vs. 10). Let us never suppose that we are apostolic witnesses merely because we speak about the faith reasonably well. What Saint Paul means by *following* involves our manner of living – a consistent day-in, day-out application of the convictions we learn from the apostles. Let us speak apostolic words, but even more so strive to live their form of life. If we behave consistently as Orthodox Christians, then our manner of living will correlate directly with that of the apostles.

Of course, we do not set out to mimic the way the apostles lived. Instead, we begin by praying for the intercession of those great servants of the Lord. The Church Fathers are adamant that true theology flows from true prayer. Doctrine and manner of life are not assimilated by our rational faculties alone. God gives these gifts to us when we follow His path, seeking deep healing for our hearts and souls and the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.

To be apostolic is to have the same life purpose and trust in God as the apostles. According to Saint Paul, the truly apostolic person trusts in the same Holy Spirit who guided the apostles in their day-to-day lives. The life-giving Spirit leads us to embrace the apostles’ goals as our own. Furthermore, with the Spirit of God guiding us, we also accept their doctrine and manner of life wholeheartedly. We walk their path naturally, for we trust Christ our God without reservation, as they did.

Let us turn all our decisions and actions over to Christ! Saint Peter once asked, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Jn 6:68-69). The apostles refused to listen to anyone who pressed them to follow another purpose: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

Third, being apostolic means to be willing to embrace the cost of sustaining our faith. If we are to follow the apostles’ doctrine and manner of life, then we follow Christ, whatever may come. Yes, we pray that we hold fast to the apostles’ faith, embrace their manner of living, and freely accept whatever price this world may extract from us for doing so.

In this vein, let us consider the Greek New Testament word *martyrion*. Prior to the Christian era, this word merely referred to a “witness.” Within a single century, however, it came to mean “one who pays the price of death for Christ.”

We “united ourselves unto Christ” at baptism, and we live by what we have seen and heard of Him in the life of His apostolic Church – Christ’s own radiant Body. Be willing to love, persevere, and to suffer for Him as He wills. Glory to Jesus Christ!

O Holy Apostle Paul, plead that we preserve thy good confession to our last breath. – Vespers for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

February 2 – Meeting of the Lord in the Temple Hebrews 7:7-17

The Ultimate Blessing: *Hebrews 7:7-17, especially vs. 7:* “Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better.” The Lord Jesus carefully instructs His followers concerning the culmination of time, when we will reach the end of the ages and the Last Judgment. On that day, the faithful will hear these words: “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34). The Master’s righteous servants – who are to be considered “lesser,” since we attain perfection only through His grace – shall then obtain the ultimate blessing from Christ, who is “better” – indeed, the best.

On another occasion, when the Virgin Theotokos and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the Temple “to present Him to the Lord” (Lk 2:22), we see the *lesser* blessed by *better*. Simeon takes the Child in his arms and acknowledges that he beholds the incarnate salvation of the human race. “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation” (vss. 29-30).

Writing today’s epistle, the Apostle Paul affirms that God the Father has provided His ultimate blessing to His people “by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Heb 1:2). The appearance of the Son of God transforms the Old Covenant into the new – and better – one.

Under the original covenant, the various offerings of God’s people were brought to the Temple to be blessed through pronouncements by the Levitical priests. As Solomon demonstrated at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chr 6:1-7,10), a variety of blessings, with thank-offerings to God, were offered that the Lord might continue His provision for the people’s earthly needs (vss. 29-30). Sin offerings were made, so that God might extend forgiveness (vss. 22-23), while holocaust offerings were presented so that God might bless the people with His presence (vss. 18-19).

These acts of worship under the Old Covenant were types to be forever replaced by the appearance of the ultimate High Priest, who gives us the ultimate blessing. Indeed, mankind continues to receive all good things from God without limit: food, clothing, shelter, everything we need.

Our God has called us forth out of every nation, instituting a new age for giving thanks in Christian temples all over the world. Our praise and thanksgiving for God’s earthly good things are embedded in the far greater offering to God from Christ, who becomes His own offering, presented once “in behalf of all, and for all” (from the anaphora).

We still need God’s forgiveness and healing, of course, since we are all sinners. To this end, our Great High Priest offers His Body and Blood through the Eucharist, in order that for “those who shall partake thereof they may be unto vigilance of soul, unto forgiveness of sins, unto the communion of [the] Holy Spirit, unto the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven.”

The perfection sought through the sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood is now fulfilled in Christ our High Priest. He ever intercedes for us (Heb 7:25). Just as Simeon embraced the ultimate blessing when he held the Child in his arms, so we now say, “My eyes have seen Your salvation” (Lk 2:30).

May we one day hear God’s perfect blessing spoken by His Son, when He declares the ultimate blessing to His own (Heb 7:11)! May we receive Him now through the Eucharist with boldness toward God and not “unto condemnation,” remembering that “Christ is in our midst!”

Let Thy mercy be upon us, O Lord, even as we have set our hope on Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 3 – Tuesday of the Third Week before Lent
2 Peter 2:9-22

The Struggle for Orthodoxy, continued – Heresy's Allure: 2 Peter 2:9-22, especially vs. 18: *"For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error."* Earlier in his epistle, Saint Peter teaches us that heresy originates from the sins of pride and greed for power and position. False teachers are always charmed by their own ideas about truth. Worse, because they willfully attract others to adopt their ideas, they become further deluded by the admiration of their followers.

While such men may think they are free, they are in fact "slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage" (vs. 19). Such is the tragic state of those who embrace heresy, "for it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them" (vs. 21).

Having spoken about the sinful desires that motivate heretics, the Apostle Peter identifies the factors that attract others to follow heretics and their ideas. Based on his insights, let us consider the steps we ought to follow if we wish to keep our Orthodox faith pure. None of us is free from sin, nor have we entirely "escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (vs. 20). We pray God that we may remain alert, never becoming "entangled in them and overcome" (vs. 20)!

Saint Peter first speaks of people who "walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness" (vs. 10), who "count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime" (vs. 13), and who have "eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin" (vs. 14). Such people are captivated "through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness" (vs. 18). We see a clear association between erroneous theology and corrupt living, with its constant indulgence of the appetites.

One popular heresy of the early centuries was Gnosticism. Many leaders of this false variant of Christianity encouraged their believers to indulge in whatever pleasures they desired, so long as they were initiated into the secret *gnosis* (knowledge) of the "real" Christianity which they invented. These deluded teachers lived debased and immoral lives while hypocritically speaking the language of piety.

Such teachings are still prevalent today, with their adherents suggesting a host of rationalizations for lewd, perverse, and indulgent behaviors plainly condemned by Holy Scripture. Such a permissive approach attracts the unwary by demanding neither purity nor ascetic struggle. True faith teaches otherwise, for the Fathers assert that "the keeping of God's commandments generates dispassion. The soul's dispassion preserves spiritual knowledge" (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 314).

In addition to blatant self-indulgence, heresy appeals to our self-will by promising freedom from authority (see vs. 10). If we choose to ignore direction from rightful authority, then we remove the spiritual and moral safety net of the Church from our lives. Instead of questioning authority, as the bumper sticker suggests, let us affirm and seek godly protection and shelter from wise pastoral leadership. Only then will we be able to follow in the footsteps of the Church Fathers.

Finally, Saint Peter addresses those "who have actually escaped from those living in error" (vs. 18). He refers here to neophytes who fail to grasp the basics of the faith, never struggling to "put off . . . the old man . . . and . . . put on the new man" (Eph 4:22). Such people are forever vulnerable to being drawn into heresy. Let us commit ourselves to knowing our faith and laboring to be transformed into the Lord Jesus' likeness.

Adorn me, O Christ, as the abode of Thy Spirit only, and in nowise the abode of sin. Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

February 4 - Wednesday of the Third Week before Lent
2 Peter 3:1-18

The Struggle for Orthodoxy, continued – Prepare for Judgment: 2 Peter 3:1-18, especially vs. 11-12: *“Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God. . . ?”* In today’s portion of Saint Peter’s second epistle, he focuses on the terrible day of the Lord’s judgment, which “will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (vs. 10).

Divine judgment is surely coming, when the *ungodly* who promote false religion will face a solemn “day of judgment and perdition” (vs. 7). How should we, as members of Christ’s flock, prepare to give an account of our lives?

Two thousand years have passed since the apostle wrote this epistle, but the Day of Judgment has not yet arrived. We sense its approach, however, for “the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (vs. 9).

If we do not wish to perish with the “scoffers . . . walking according to their own lusts” (vs. 3), let us heed Saint Peter’s counsel. Our desire, like his, is to meet the Lord “in peace, without spot and blameless” (vs. 14).

First, then, let us struggle to be “mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandments of . . . the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (vs. 2). All of Scripture attests to the coming of Divine Judgment, teaching that “the heavens and the earth while now preserved by the same word [of God] are reserved for fire” (vs. 7).

God reveals Himself as patient, compassionate, and merciful, yet we also know that He is righteous and just. For example, when God establishes His covenant with Abraham, He warns him of what will happen: “Know for certain that your seed will be strangers in a land not their own” (Gn 15:13). Indeed, Abraham’s family went into Egypt and was enslaved by the Pharaohs.

Yet God fulfilled His prophecy, for after serving the Egyptians for four hundred years, the people were freed. God keeps His word! The Lord allowed Israel to taste slavery in Egypt, but He also looked after His people. Thus they flourished in Egypt, despite their servitude.

In revealing these events to Abraham, the Lord offers words we should consider in our hearts: “Then, in the fourth generation they [Abraham’s descendants] shall return here, for the sin of the Amorites is not yet filled up” (Gn 15:16). God puts His people through times of trial in order to free us from sin, for His judgment is sure.

Indeed, God tolerates iniquity only for a time. His judgment eventually comes to nations and individuals alike. Let us be wise and prepare our hearts now, so that we may face the Lord in hope. May He stir up our hearts “by way of reminder” (2 Pt 3:1), so that we may keep the apostle’s teachings reverently.

In particular, let us never indulge in idle questioning. Speculation only opens the door to evil and leads us into moral and spiritual confusion. Only the Lord Jesus conversed successfully with Satan, since He alone is sinless. Now, “all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (vs. 4).

Finally, let us strive to live pure and godly lives, even if it requires painful struggle at times. Christ has promised to help us and save us. May we grow “in holy conduct and godliness” (vs. 11) as we prepare ourselves ever more fully for the coming Day of Judgment.

Grant me repentance and a good defense before Thy dread Judgment Seat, O Christ. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 5 – Thursday of the Third Week Before Lent
1 John 1:8-2:6

Sin: 1 John 1:8-2:6, especially vss. 8-9: *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* Today begins a series of six readings from the first epistle of Saint John. This letter introduces us to the apostle’s unique teaching style, which earned him the exalted title of “theologian.” As we prepare to explore his key truths concerning lust, the devil, love, spirit, and faith, Saint John first asks us to consider sin, the dark side of our fallen human state.

By establishing the pervasive presence of sin within the human personality, Saint John affirms the same truth proclaimed by the Apostle Paul: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Saint John encourages us to look deeply into the deadly wound that sin wreaks in our hearts and souls, so that we may avoid the serious error of “say[ing] that we have no sin.” If we “deceive ourselves . . . [then] the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8).

In the next five verses, the apostle emphasizes that *all* have sinned, including the faithful – we who have entered into the Body of Christ, the Church – along with worldly people. We, too, are among the sinners: self-deceived, unrighteous, devoid of truth, yet blessed by God’s love, faithfulness, and righteousness.

Because of sin’s universality, the apostle urges us to *confess our sins*, assuring us that God will “forgive us our sins” and “cleanse us” (vs. 9). Although his words underscore the vast chasm between God and mankind, he also declares the Lord’s solution: “We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (vss. 2:1-2).

These basic truths concerning sin provide the groundwork for us to avoid and overcome the burden of the sin within us. Sin, being self-deception (vs. 1:8), is the greatest of tragedies: “Know this: their heart is ashes; they go astray, and no one can deliver his soul. See, you will not say, ‘There is a lie in my right hand’” (Is 44:20). As a result of sin, we often fail to separate lies from truth. Our hearts are darkened and we become “futile in [our] thoughts” (Rom 1:21).

The snare of sin deprives us of truth (1 Jn 1:8), for God’s “word is not in us” (vs. 10). God is Truth (Jn 14:6), but sin deceives, corrupts, and throws us into unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9, 2:1). Hence, we are “detestable and unclean” (Job 15:14-16).

Saint John’s good news is that sin can be overcome (1 Jn 2:1). We need not submit to sin, for the apostle teaches that we practice truth by receiving Christ into ourselves and confessing our sin (vss. 1:8-9). God can and does cleanse “us from all unrighteousness” (vs. 9).

Confession, then, is more than owning up to some sordid facts. It diminishes our affront while admitting the Word of God into the depths of our being (vss. 1:9-10). Whenever we honestly confess our sins, “Jesus Christ the righteous” advocates for us with the Father (vs. 2:1). He presents Himself as our *propitiation*, for He died that we might live (vs. 2:2).

The apostle longs for us to receive Christ and activate this forgiveness of our sins (vs. 2:2). The Lord Jesus alone is capable of overcoming sin for us. Accepting Christ as Lord is the essential first step toward victory. Let us seek Him, know Him, and keep His commandments (vs. 3). Then “the love of God can be perfected” (vs. 5) in us and we can begin “to walk just as He walked” (vs. 6).

O Lord, grant me the gift of repentance, forgiveness of sins, deliverance and pardon. – Prayer after the Sacrament of Confession

February 6 - Friday of the Third Week before Lent
1 John 2:7-17

Lust: 1 John 2:7-17, especially vs. 17: “*And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*” Yesterday we focused on sin, the first of six key truths drawn from Saint John’s first epistle. Today the focus is on lust (in Greek, *epithymia*). In our sexually over-charged society, we most often associate lust with inordinate sexual craving.

However, our epistle writer uses *lust* in the broader sense of any strong “desire for, inclination toward, or passionate attachment.” Just the word “desire” has both negative and positive connotations in English, depending on the context, so does the term “lust” among New Testament authors writing in Greek (see Mt 13:17; Lk 15:16; Phil 1:23). However, we most commonly find *epithymia* used negatively in Scripture, as exemplified by our opening quote (1 Jn 2:17).

As Orthodox Christians, we usually consider “lusts” to be the equivalent of the passions. Saint Gregory of Sinai, along with other Church Fathers, does not consider the passions to be evil. God, he writes, “did not make [the soul] have rage and animal lust; He endowed the soul only with appetitive power and with the courage to be lovingly attracted,” i.e., to have healthy, natural desire (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 108).

Desire is transformed into lust when we exclude God from the picture. Without God, the natural powers of our soul become corrupt. Abba Sisoës, one of the Desert Fathers, stresses along with Saint James that “each man is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (Jas 1:14).

With Saint John the Evangelist, the problem with desire is not something inherent in the order of creation. Rather, the difficulty arises from our enslavement to the things of this world and to our physical being (1 Jn 2:15-16). God made the world, forming our very flesh and our eyes, yet sin turns even our natural desires into lust.

What is Saint John’s solution to desire run amok? What we do when lust separates us from God? First, we must seek God’s grace to resist hatred, craving, and lust. We are renewed and supported by a power greater than lust and the unruly passions, “because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining” (vs. 8). This new condition is God’s gift to us in Christ, if we only embrace Him.

Second, Saint John gives us “an old commandment” from the Lord – a commandment that existed from the *beginning* of time (vs. 7). We are to love one another and “abide in the light” so that there will be “no cause for stumbling” (vs. 10).

This spiritual condition in Christ is described using several images. Our *sins are forgiven* for His name’s sake (vs. 12). We *know Him* who is from the beginning (vss. 13-14, Jn 1:1). We “have overcome the wicked one” in Christ (1 Jn 2:13). We are strong because “the word of God abides” in us (vs. 14). We strive to care for those whom God introduces into our lives with a passionless love.

Since God’s word is at work in us, the beloved apostle counsels us to resist the wicked one who is already defeated by the Lord Jesus. We become vulnerable only if we allow Satan to entice us into shifting our love from God to His creation: “Do not love the world or the things in the world” (vs. 15).

When we love created things, our love for God diminishes and “the love of the Father is not in” us (vs. 15). Without the life blood of God’s love, our hearts wither. Then “all that is in the world” (vs. 17) and our lust for the flesh takes over. We lust after the things we see, rather than directing our desire toward our unseen Father (vs. 16). In Christ, however, we may overcome lust and abide forever (vs. 17)!

To Thee I come, O Christ, blinded in my soul’s eyes, crying unto Thee in repentance, “Thou art the Light; let me abide in Thee that I not stumble but overcome the wicked one.” – Sunday of the Blind Man

February 7 - Saturday of the Third Week before Lent
2 Timothy 3:1-9

Godliness vs. Self-Love: 2 Timothy 3:1-9, especially vss. 2, 5: “*For men will be lovers of themselves. . . . having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away.*” Although the epistle readings for today and tomorrow are drawn from Saint Paul’s writings, they share the concern with sin and lust found in Saint John’s first epistle. For example, Saint Paul warns us that men of the “last days” (vs. 1) “will be lovers of themselves” (vs. 2). Such people may appear religious, but they lack the depth of true conviction and practice (vs. 5). Weighed down under sins and lusts (vs. 6), these men stifle the “knowledge of the truth” (vs. 7) and confuse the immature and gullible.

If we merely dally with holy truth, we obscure true piety and godliness. Armed with apostolic wisdom, however, we can resist error and the false piety it spawns often in the form of counterfeit religion (vs. 8). First, we must examine and cleanse our own lives of ungodliness, so that the Holy Spirit will illumine us and guard us.

Saint Paul identifies several characteristics that distinguish true and false godliness. We encounter pious souls who love God, but we also meet *seemingly* devout persons who are “lovers of themselves” (vs. 2).

According to Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, “So often when we say ‘I love you,’ we say it with a large ‘I’ and a small ‘you.’ We use love as a conjunction instead of it being a verb implying action.” In loving God we encounter this same gulf between outward form and true substance, unless we can arrive at “that time when there is a longing in the heart for God Himself, not for His gifts, but God Himself” (*Beginning to Pray*, p. xvi, xviii).

Self-love and love for God are at polar opposites on the spectrum. Since few of us are entirely free of self-love, we must ask ourselves: “Toward which of these loves am I moving?” We may also be tempted to wonder about others, speculating as to which kind of love is manifested in their lives – in which direction are they moving?”

However, we are easily deceived. Many nice people are also very self-serving; they have the outer form of godliness, but choke its roots before they can sink deeply into the heart. There is no objective tests for identifying empty piety. Whenever we assess ourselves and others, we do so from hearts that are not reliable testing instruments. This is why Christ warns us against judging (Mt 7:1).

But what about those who seem to be maturing in the Holy Spirit? And what about us? “Who are you to judge another’s servant?” chides Saint Paul. “To his own master he stands or falls” (Rom 14:4). Speaking of himself, he says, “In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord” (1 Cor 4:3-4).

Next, Saint Paul says that false godliness denies us the power inherent in true godliness (2 Tim 3:5). He mentions multiple causes for this denial, including ignorance (vs. 7); misplaced love of self, money, or adulation (vs. 2); love of one’s own ideas or pleasures (vs. 3); disobedience, ingratitude, and pride (vs. 2); lack of self-control and loyalty (vss. 3-4). Let us pray that God will cleanse us until we overflow with love, thankfulness, and praise, always ready to give account of the faith within us.

Lastly, the Apostle Paul speaks of resisting the truth (vs. 8) – another sure sign of false piety. True godliness submits to the Lord, to godly authority and wise teachers; we follow Truth, no matter the price. Living in a headstrong age of relativity, we must ground ourselves in the basics of our faith if we wish to recognize every compromise with truth, every subtle form of resistance to the Gospel and its call to a genuine, holy life.

Spirit of Truth, guide and save me from all false choices for Thy Holy Name’s sake.

February 8 - Sunday of the Prodigal Son – Third Sunday before Lent
1 Corinthians 6:12-20

The Body: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, especially vss. 19-20: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

Living in this present age, we are constantly exposed to the secular assumptions of modern society. However, let us never forget that we are Christ’s disciples, to whom Saint Paul addresses the convicting words, “You are not your own” (vs. 19). If we wish to be faithful to the Lord to whom we belong, we must listen carefully to what the apostle says. We remain wary of adopting the mindset of this age, lest we fail to perceive the unchanging message of the life-giving Gospel. We distort this message to our soul’s detriment, for our salvation is both present and eternal.

The word “body” (*soma*) is a case in point. The translators of the Old Testament Septuagint, used by the Orthodox Church, applied a very specific meaning to *soma*. Indeed, our modern notion of the body as the individual’s corporal or physical substance rarely appears in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew word most frequently rendered as *soma* by the Septuagint translators is *basar* (flesh). But even *basar* does not refer to a wholly corporal entity.

The New Testament epistles were composed more than two centuries after the Septuagint was completed, but many of the letters the work of the rabbinically trained Apostle Paul. His concepts thus reflect the Septuagint’s Hebraic mindset, including his use of the terms “flesh” and “body.” Only once, in all his writing, does Saint Paul assign a meaning to “body” that resembles our modern concept of corporeality (see 1 Thes 5:23).

Rather, Saint Paul’s use of “body” corresponds most closely to our modern concept of the “total person.” To grasp the difference, let us try reading verse 13 again using Saint Paul’s original meaning. A rich set of associations and innuendos floods our understanding of the text.

For example, the term “sexual immorality” (vs. 13) is no longer confined to a wrongful activity undertaken by our physical body, as modern readings would have it. Saint Paul understands the immoral sexual activity of the body as something that corrupts the entire person – spiritually and psychologically, as well as physically. We begin at once to grasp the immense gulf between Saint Paul’s vision and our own narrow, modern understanding of sexuality.

Any bodily union between persons, whether in marriage or through immoral liaisons, has much broader implications when viewed from an Orthodox Christian perspective. The Apostle Paul reminds us that any sexual union is much more than a mere physical joining. Every such act delivers an accompanying load of spiritual and psychological baggage.

We ignore these unseen factors at our peril when we assume that our bodies are nothing more than corporal entities. Horrified by such an attitude, Saint Paul begs us: “Do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her?” (vs. 16). By using the term *one body*, he implies that we also share one mind, heart, conscience, and will with the other.

As Saint Paul describes the work of the Holy Spirit within us, he helps us to see our self more fully and comprehensively. We are indeed “temples of the Holy Spirit” (vs. 19) – a dwelling place that should be fit for God, both inwardly and outwardly.

Spirit of Truth, come and abide in me, cleanse me of every stain of sin, and save me. – Prayer to the Holy Spirit

February 9 - Monday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
1 John 2:18-3:10

The Devil: 1 John 2:18-3:10, especially vs. 8: *“He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.”* Evil is a person – one who seeks to corrupt, deceive, and destroy humanity, and most especially us, the “children of God” (vs. 3:10)! Thankfully, this ugly truth is countered by the prevailing message of the apostle’s letter: “The Word of life . . . was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father. . . . that you also may have fellowship with . . . the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (vs. 1:1-3).

Throughout this epistle, Saint John catalogues varied manifestations of demonic power, including “darkness” (vs. 2:11), “antichrist” (2:18, 22), “the devil” (vs. 3:8), a father of “children” (vs. 3:10), “death” (vs. 3:14), “he who is in the world” (vs. 4:4), the “spirit of error” (vs. 4:6), and “the wicked one” (vss. 5:18, 19).

Not every one of these manifestations of evil refers to the same dark, spiritual entity, yet all have a common source: the fallen angel called Satan. He himself is named four times by the apostle, who calls him “the devil,” “he who is in the world,” “the spirit of error” and the “wicked one.”

Today’s reading begins with a discourse concerning *antichrist* (vs. 2:18). This word is not a synonym for the devil, but refers to a spiritual power under Satan’s control. Antichrist operates through every person who opposes the Lord, the Gospel, and the Church (vs. 18-19). Only much later, at a climactic point of history near the end of time, will a single, powerful person identified as “the” Antichrist appear on the world scene.

Saint Paul identifies the Antichrist with “the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Thes 2:3-4). This “lawless one,” he continues, “will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy” (vs. 8).

Before the Lord destroys him, however, Antichrist will be exalted “according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thes 2:9-10). Everyone who falls under his sway will be in grave danger of becoming corrupted.

For this reason, Saint John urges us to constantly “abide in the Son and in the Father” (1 Jn 2:24). We are to *purify* ourselves (vs. 3:3) and “practice righteousness” (vs. 10).

John does not mince words as he portrays the terrible choices that face us. He writes vigorously in order to save us from walking in darkness as children of the devil and falling into spiritual, moral, and eternal death. He warns us to cling steadfastly to the truth that we are God’s children, for we have received the sacrament of holy chrismation, “an anointing from the Holy One, and [we] know all things” (vs. 2:20) essential for our salvation.

We have the “promise that He has promised us – eternal life” (vs. 25). Let us not be “ashamed before Him at His coming” (vs. 28)! If we heed Saint John’s entire message, we will oppose the devil’s work and affirm the apostle’s witness that “the Word of life . . . was manifested to us. . . . that you also may fellowship with us” (vss. 1:1-2).

Let us take God’s message of hope to heart, embracing it always. If this message abides in us, we “also will abide in the Son and in the Father” (vs. 2:24). Saint John’s message is life, reminding us that we “are of God, little children, and have overcome [evil], because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (vs. 4:4).

Grant us, O Christ our God, a good defense before Thy fearful Judgment Seat. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 10 - February 10 – Saint Haralampos
2 Timothy 2:1-10

Committing the Ministry: 2 Timothy 2:1-10, especially vs. 2: *“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”* Following His baptism, the Lord Jesus trained a select group of men who would experience His ministry, Passion, and Resurrection (Lk 24:48). Later, He named them apostles, meaning “those sent.” These men were formally commissioned to labor as His ambassadors and serve as pastors over His flock, the authorized teachers of His Gospel (Mt 28:19-20).

Christ Jesus committed this ministry to His apostles so that others, in turn, might follow the Lord as the true Way. The process of committing one another to the faith continues to the present day without interruption. It has never been the sole possession of some elite inner society. Rather, it is the work of the whole community of the People of God – all of us whom are called “the faithful.”

At an ordination, the faithful see the candidate brought before the bishop as to Christ. The plea is made, “Command, holy Master.” The bishop prays to Christ our God, the Master of all, to fill this human vessel with grace, strength, and love through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

As the bishop vests the one who will minister within the Church, he declares: “He is worthy.” The faithful in turn assent, “He is worthy.” This commissioning of ordination is a communal work by the community, the Body of Christ. We commit “faithful men, who will be able to teach others” (vs. 2) what every member has within himself.

What does the Church require of our leaders, those selected to train others and hand on the life in Christ? Above all, leaders are to acquire the interior life needed to transmit the faith to others. Such an orientation comes only from Christ.

For this reason, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy, “You . . . be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (vs. 1). No one who teaches, leads, pastors, admonishes, or counsels is able to do so on the basis of natural skill. Nor can our leaders rely solely on a college or seminary education, or on some special courses they attended.

All such commitment occurs through “the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Church leaders capable of investing the faith in others – bishops, priests, deacons, even church school teachers – must steep themselves in Christ’s life as it flows through the Church.

Saint Paul teaches that those selected to transmit the faith to others must be faithful to the ministry and Person of Christ our God (vs. 2). All of the faithful must embark upon the lifelong process of purification and illumination, by which we are renewed in Christ.

We strive to escape “the corruption that is in the world through lust” as well as to “be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4) by means of theosis (deification). Of course, we do not expect perfection of our leaders. Rather, our leaders themselves are seeking completion in Christ. Evidence of this quest is the basis for our trust in them.

Every faithful leader commissioned by the Lord Jesus for ministry through His Church must develop an aptitude for conveying the faith. These leaders need to “be able to teach others also” (vs. 2).

Ultimately, however, a commitment to live the life in Christ is the true basis of the ministry required of the Church’s true leaders. To help another person commit to the Lord, we must know Him in our heart. As we seek to know Him, the Lord Jesus shapes us from the inside out. Let us make Him our life and our hope, as He desires to be for each one of us.

Preserve, O Lord, in pureness of life and unswerving faith, all who are joined to Thee! –Prayer of Ordination

February 11 - Wednesday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
1 John 3:21-4:6

Spirit: 1 John 3:21-4:6, especially vs. 4:6: *“We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”* Science has amassed a large body of data concerning the role of environment in our health, growth, and survival. These findings reveal that we human beings live within a number of interrelated “environments” simultaneously.

Although the Church Fathers do not resort to scientific terminology, they are aware of the existence of multiple environments, often referred to as realms, kingdoms, eons, or ages. One such realm is that of the spirit, a dimension that many people in today can barely comprehend. As the faithful in Christ, however, we are blessed with an appreciation of this spiritual dimension.

We might even go so far as to define the faithful as those who live with awareness of the spiritual existence expressed within the life of the Church. Aided by God’s grace, we perceive within every environment the presence and activity of God’s kingdom, which comprises the foremost realm encompassing human life.

Living with an awareness of the kingdom enables us to say, with the Apostle John, “We are of God” (vs. 4:6). We understand John’s “we” to refer not only to the apostles, but to everyone who struggles to remain in communion with them. As Christians, we strive to live in harmony with and be nurtured by the apostolic environment of the Church, for this “environment of the spirit” has ultimate command and power over our lives.

Christ our Lord taught that “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24). In this epistle, the Apostle John reminds us that there are many spirits (1 Jn 4:1): the “Spirit of God” (vs. 2); the spirit *of truth* and the spirit *of error* (vs. 6), and the “spirit of the Antichrist” (vs. 3). Very few of those around us are aware of such things! Only because we are *of God* are we able to grasp the dramatic contrast between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error!

Saint John the Theologian lived his life fully conscious of the spiritual realm. He knew the Word of God, Jesus Christ, who “has come in the flesh” (vs. 4:2). He saw the Lord with his own eyes, touched Him with his hands, heard Him with his ears (vs. 1:1).

He also perceived the presence of the false lying spirits abroad in the world – spirits that do not come from God, but spring from error. These spirits promote an etherealized Gospel that denies the reality that Christ “has come in the flesh” (vs. 4:2).

Note how the verb “has come” indicates the present tense. Having become incarnate for our sakes, the Lord Jesus Christ still remains *in the flesh*, bonded forever to our humanity. He is one of us, even now. “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” unto ages of ages!

Mankind, into whom God breathed the spirit of life, is now intimately united to God, for God has taken the flesh of man permanently upon Himself. Our physical existence is united to God’s own being. As we meditate upon our physical existence, we understand that God has bestowed great honor on us – an incredible dignity!

As if taking on our flesh were not enough, the apostle reminds us that Christ has “given us of His Spirit” (vs. 4:13). The Holy Spirit dwells in us and within the healing environment we call the Church, enabling us to know “that we abide in [Christ], and He in us” (vs. 13).

Jesus Christ manifested His divinity in Jordan when He was baptized. He comes to us in the blessed waters of our own baptism, and in the mystery of holy communion. He even bore our flesh on the Cross, defeating death. How do we know this? “It is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth” (vs. 5:6).

Master, by Thy Holy Spirit, open our eyes noetically to the knowledge of Thy truth.

February 12 - Thursday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
1 John 4:20-5:21

Faith: 1 John 4:20-5:21, especially vs. 5:4: “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith.” Faith is mentioned only once in the entire first epistle of John, in the verse quoted above. Yet the apostle is much concerned with true faith in its multiple dimensions. Let us read and inquire what the Apostle means by *faith*.

Understanding what this word signifies helps us grasp what Saint John is saying in these verses. A quick scan of today’s reading yields a list of at least fourteen important truths. Yet each of these statements could be rephrased so as to begin with the clause: “To have faith is”

In other words, we can say that to *have faith* is to believe that Jesus is the Christ (vs. 5:1); to love God (vs. 3); to have eternal life in God’s Son (vs. 13); to keep His commandments (vs. 3); and to pray for a fellow Christian when he sins (vs. 16). Each statement reflects three aspects of our Christian faith: it describes faith’s essence, tells us what faith entails for us disciples, and offers assurances as we follow Christ in faith.

So what defines the essence of faith, according to the Apostle John? First of all, to have faith is to “receive the witness . . . of God” (vs. 9). The overarching message of this epistle is that we must always affirm God’s objective acts in history – acts which Saint John witnessed with his own eyes.

“That which . . . we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare. . . .” (vs. 1:1-2). The apostle’s statement in verse 5:9, however, challenges us to go beyond his own witness, for “the witness of God is greater.”

Saint John expands upon his statements concerning faith in several steps. Given that faith means to receive or embrace another’s witness, each of us must stand behind this testimony “in himself” (vs. 10). We affirm with the apostles “that Jesus is the Son of God” (vs. 5) and also “that Jesus is the Christ . . . born of God” (vs. 1).

The only difference between these two statements is the Lord’s title. “Christ” is directed to John’s early Jewish readers, while “Son of God” speaks to the Gentiles of the first century. However, both titles have the same meaning: “The Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true” (vs. 5:20).

To “know Him who is true” means to “believe in the name of the Son of God” (vs. 13), for only in this way do we “[have] the Son” (vs. 5:12). And if we have the Son, then we have eternal life (vss. 11-12). Thus the apostle proclaims, “Whoever believes . . . is born of God” (vs. 1).

How are we to preserve this true faith, as ones *born of God*? First, we must obey God’s commandments (vs. 2-3), keeping ourselves from sin so that “the wicked one does not touch [us]” (vs. 18).

Further, we are to love all those *begotten* of God (vs. 1). Love of our brethren is the litmus test of whether we are children of God, for “we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments” (vs. 2).

In obeying the command to love our brethren, we discover that God’s love is never *burdensome* (vs. 3), for God assures us that He answers the Church’s prayers. If a brother sins, but does not persist in his sin, then our prayers as the Church may effectively restore him to life (vs. 16). Our goal is to avoid doing consciously what we know to be contrary to God’s will, lest we run the risk of committing “sin leading to death” (vs. 16).

O Lord, let none of us be reprobate, but rescue us from death by Thy compassions. – Priest’s Prayer at Sunday Orthros

February 13 - Friday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
2 John 1:1-13

The Father and the Son: 2 John 1:1-13, especially vs. 9: “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” The seven ecumenical councils addressed a variety of issues, but the nature of the Lord Jesus was constantly on the agenda. The relationship between the Father and the Son was challenged even while our Lord was still preaching and teaching (Jn 9:29-39).

Today’s passage reminds us that the apostles, as they preached, met many people who did “not abide in the doctrine of Christ.” Rather, many individuals were spinning their own theories about Jesus’ identity and questioning the truth revealed by His followers.

This failure to accept “the truth which abides in us [the apostles] and will be with us for ever” (2 Jn 2) continues to the present day. Our race finds still many ways to abandon “the doctrine of Christ” (vs. 9)!

However, there is only one truth concerning the Father and the Son. Any step away from it removes us from the true Light, for this apostolic truth remains central: “He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (vs. 9).

Ancient Israel knew the grace of almighty God. Their musicians – the “sons of Korah” – sang: “God will give grace and glory; the Lord will not withhold good things from them that walk in innocence” (Ps 83:12).

Even more, the Old Covenant people praised Him for His mercy, no doubt because they were so often delivered from annihilation – a judgment they saw meted out on many peoples around them. “All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth, unto them that seek after His covenant and His testimonies” (Ps 24:10).

Ancient Israel truly knew that peace from God includes healing and release from strife. “I will hear what the Lord God will speak in me; for He will speak peace to His people and to His saints and to them that turn their heart unto Him” (Ps 84:8).

The apostolic message, however, announces a deeper “grace, mercy, and peace” to the people of the New Covenant. This peace comes from God, now called “the Father,” and “from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love” (2 Jn 3).

This new apostolic message is pervaded by a marked shift how we address God. He is no longer distant from us, nor is He separated from His Son, our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, the One who instructs us to call God “our Father” (Mt 6:9).

Many resisted John’s apostolic confession of “Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 Jn 7). Writing in his old age, the apostle faced many teachers who claimed that the eternal Word of God merely *appeared* to be a flesh-and-blood human being. These heretics could not understand how God, as pure Spirit, would contaminate Himself with our physical existence. For them, our physical nature formed the source of mankind’s deepest problems.

Yet “God formed the man of dust of the earth” (Gn 2:7) and declared we were made in His image: man was “very good” (Gn 1:27, 31). The apostles then touched and knew God in the flesh – He was fully God and fully man, like themselves, except for sin.

In Jesus Christ, God reveals the complete, unveiled truth. The *abiding doctrine of Christ* (2 Jn 9) throws open the gates of heaven, enabling us to say, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15). Let us confess the Father and the Son as we keep God’s commandments (2 Jn 6).

I confess the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the Trinity, one in essence, and undivided. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 14 - Saturday of Meatfare Week (Second Week before Lent)
1 Corinthians 10:23-28

Preparing to Fast: 1 Corinthians 10:23-28, especially vs. 26: “For ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness.’” (Ps 23:1). We are approaching the threshold of Great Lent, preparing to enter the “bright sadness” of the fast. It is an appropriate time to ask ourselves if we are prepared for fasting, and to reflect on Saint Paul’s wisdom concerning eating and abstaining. Let us begin by considering some pertinent historical background and some thoughts concerning the days ahead. May this holy season be profitable to us in our life in Christ!

In Saint Paul’s day, only a tiny handful of Christians lived in the city of Corinth. They worked, shopped, and socialized amidst pagan customs, commerce, and society. Having professed Christ, they faced a special problem: How were they to keep themselves “pure and undefiled . . . before God” (Jas 1:27) while living in a pagan culture?

The meat available in the markets of Corinth was usually compromised by idolatrous rituals, for it came from animals that had been slaughtered in sacrifice to pagan gods. When an animal was offered to the idols, only a tiny portion of the meat was actually consumed during the actual ritual. The rest was sold to help support the operation of the temples.

To help the new disciples, Saint Paul offered a rule based on love and sensitivity to the conscience of others. Thus he says, “Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being” (1 Cor 10:24). For the faithful in Corinth, this advice meant that they should buy meat at the markets without overly burdening themselves with inquiries into the source of their purchases (vs. 25).

Likewise, when invited to dinner, they were to eat without asking questions as long as no one indicated that the meat came from pagan temples (vs. 27). The apostle grounds his rule in the revealed principle that all comes from God (vs. 26, Ps 23:1). Therefore nothing is considered impure, unless one’s conscience is contaminated (Mk 7:18-20).

How do these principles apply to the Lenten fasting disciplines? First and foremost, they speak to freedom of conscience. Do we fast because it is a rule that we must follow? If such is our primary motivation, then we have not chosen freely to fast with the Church. Instead, we are operating on the basis of rote obedience to religious traditions and rules.

Such behavior constitutes Judaizing, for slavishness destroys our freedom in Christ (Gal 2:4, 16). Christ our God *commends* fasting to His disciples (Mt 6:16), but He does not command it as He does in the case of the liturgy (“Do this in remembrance of Me” – Lk 22:19).

According to Father John Romanides, there are two important reasons why Orthodox Christians ought to fast: “Love, unity and communion of immortality with each other and with the saints in Christ; and . . . the war against Satan and his powers, already defeated in the flesh of Christ by those living in Christ, beyond death” (Akakios, *Fasting in the Orthodox Church*, p. 54).

Let us choose to fast, then, in order to express our unity with the Church, and to deny the demons control of our passions by depriving Satan of these points of entry into our souls. However, we should not pursue fasting if we merely are seeking our own good at the expense of others (1 Cor 10:24). Let us fast quietly in communion with our fellow Christians and before non-Christians.

What of using our freedom in Christ to avoid fasting altogether? Such an act would be self-serving. By suggesting that our common life in Christ is insignificant, we might weaken other disciples in their struggle. On the other hand, if by God’s grace we sustain an unassuming attitude toward fasting, we may show non-Orthodox the value of the common life in Christ. Above all, let us express our mutual love in the Lord, recalling that if we flaunt our fasting (or non-fasting), already we have our reward (see Mt 6:16-18).

Fortify me, O Lord, that I may fulfill the fast in God-pleasing purity and devotion. – Cheesefare Sunday

February 15 - Meatfare Sunday – Sunday of the Last Judgment (Second Sunday before Lent)
1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2

Preparing for the Fast, continued: 1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2, especially vs. 10: *“For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?”* Today’s passage from First Corinthians is intended to help us prepare for the coming fast. Once again, after a little background and history, we will examine the apostle’s counsels concerning the asceticism of fasting.

In Corinth, as in other Roman cities, first-century Christians encountered idolatry in a variety of settings. If they belonged to trade guilds, for example, then they were routinely expected to attend occasional dinners held at the temple of the god associated with that guild. Thus, a believer might be invited to dine at one of the numerous pagan temples. On the positive side, eating such meals did not typically require any participation in the rituals and worship of the deities.

As we learned yesterday, a token amount of the food served might have been offered to the idols prior to the actual meal. Christians knew, of course, that the idols were pure fiction (vs. 8:4). They saw nothing wrong with eating at the tables in the idols’ temples, as long as they did not have to participate in the pagan rites and ceremonies. Indeed, many temple meals were arguably social occasions with no religious significance.

However, the concerns that the Apostle Paul expresses in this passage are not limited to certain kinds of overt ritual behavior. He cares about the perceptions and motives of Christians and non-Christians alike. Thus, his focus has implications beyond the situation of first-century Corinth and provides an important message for us today.

What are our motives for fasting during Lent, or for not fasting? What relationship do we wish to establish between our behavior and our intentions? How might the relationship between motive and action differ when an activity is dubbed “religious,” vs. when it is not? What is the nature of “this liberty of [ours]” (vss. 8:9)? Are we responsible for the interpretations that others place on our actions?

When Saint Paul states that “food does not commend us to God” (vs. 8:8), he clearly included all food, regardless of whether we eat or abstain from eating. Our daily activities may bring us blessing but also condemnation, for God’s gaze is directed deep into our hearts. God sees what men can only infer (1 Kgs 16:7).

Seemingly innocent acts that serve our ego may in fact be wicked, self-indulgent, or without true concern for others. Such actions will not “commend us to God” (1 Jn 8:8) – indeed, they may merit His condemnation.

Why do we take up the Lenten fast, if there is no specific merit in fasting per se? According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “All that is not done for Christ’s sake, even though it be good, brings neither reward in the future life nor the grace of God in this life” (*Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 86).

And yet Saint Paul warns us not to ignore the dangers of free choice (vss. 8:9-12). Because society at large does not observe Lent, occasions will arise when we are tempted to break our abstinence from meat and dairy. On such occasions, let us consider not only our own motives for breaking the fast, but the perceptions of others.

If a nonbeliever offers us food, is he perhaps testing our resolve to maintain the Church’s practice? Does he even care about our faith? What of our fellow believers who may see us break the discipline? We are our brother’s keeper, after all (Gn 4:8-10).

Let us beware of convenient excuses and rationalizations during the Lenten fast. God is weighing our motives (1 Chr 29:17). We ought never act casually in any matter concerning our faith, whether we are with fellow Orthodox Christians or outsiders observing our witness.

Lord, help me to love Thee, and keep firm my life in communion of Thy Holy Spirit. – Saint Basil the Great

February 16 - Monday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
3 John 1:1-15

The Work of the Great Fast – Caring for the Brethren: 3 John 1:1-15, especially vs. 5: “*Do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren. . .*” During this final week before Great Lent, we abstain from meat but not from dairy products. For this reason, we refer to this week as “cheesefare.” We continue the epistle readings assigned during the Lenten Triodion until Clean (or Pure) Monday. When Lent commences, our readings shift to the Book of Proverbs.

The theme of the week prior to Clean Monday concerns the specific tasks to which we will be applying ourselves during the coming forty days. The central message is this: If we labor as faithful disciples in a God-pleasing manner, then the Lord will bring springtime into our souls, allowing us to sprout fruitfully. He will make known to us the full joy of His holy Pascha.

The third, and last, of Saint John’s epistles records a rather sour turn of events in a local congregation. Diotrephes, the pastor, opposes the authority of the Apostle John (vs. 10). Despite John’s letters of appeal, Diotrephes, “who loves to have the preeminence . . . does not receive . . . fellow workers for the truth” (vss. 9-8), i.e., the apostle’s representatives. Now, John writes a letter to Gaius to be delivered by a special emissary, Demetrios, a man of “good testimony from all, and from the truth itself” (vs. 12).

Gaius has a proven record as a leader within the troubled congregation. The apostle declares him to be a man known to “walk in the truth” (vs. 1). The central message of Saint John’s letter centers around two commands: “walk in the truth” and “do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren” (vss. 3, 5). As disciples, we need to love our fellow Christians with genuine concern, so that all may go “forth for His name’s sake” (vs. 7) and present Christ to the world.

As we prepare for the pilgrimage of the Lenten Fast – what Father Alexander Schmemmann calls the “journey to Pascha” – let us keep our focus on attaining the heights revealed in Christ, our Passover, so that we may celebrate the glory of the Lord Jesus. For this reason we are already focusing on our preparations for Pascha now!

The Apostle John explains the glory of the Lord Jesus succinctly: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16). God’s love has been extended to us, unworthy as we are, and this great love requires us to love others (vs. 15:12).

We are forgiven our trespasses; let us speedily forgive others their wrongs (Mt 6:14-15). God’s consistent love saves us if and when we love those whom He sends into our lives. In all of his epistles, the apostle highlights this truth. Now, in this final brief letter, he emphasizes love’s truth once more.

Let us consider why the apostle calls Gaius “beloved” (vs. 1). Gaius is known for his witness of “love before the church” (vs. 6). He faithfully cares for the brethren “in a manner worthy of God” (vs. 6). These characteristics tell us how is love made real.

True love does not belong to the realm of intangible feelings; caring is visible. Love is tangibly practiced as a help to other Christians in their struggles (vs. 8). Love enables the faithful to go “forth for His Name’s sake” (vs. 7). We accept rebuff in this world, and still freely return love to those who afflict us “for the Lord’s sake.”

In this holy season, let us learn to “imitate what . . . is good” (vs. 11). Our Lord Jesus Christ appeals to us. If we respond to His love in kind, we will be numbered among those who are “of God” (vs. 11). Like Demetrios, we will have “a good testimony from all” (vs. 12).

O God of perfect peace and love, grant that I may love in a manner worthy of Thee. – Service of Betrothal

February 17 - Tuesday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
Jude 1-10

The Work of the Fast – Contending for the Faith: *Jude 1-10, especially vs. 3:* “*I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.*” When God “called [and] sanctified [the faithful] . . . in Jesus Christ” (vs. 1), He also preserved and protected us against anyone who would “turn the grace of God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 4). Our Lord gives us a complete and eternal faith, a sure foundation for our soul, subject neither to revision nor modification. This faith “was once for all delivered to the saints” (vs. 3).

How can the Church make such a claim in a world where everything changes constantly? The source of our radical certainty lies in the Lord Jesus, our incarnate God. Who or what can ever supersede Him? There will never be an improved, modernized, or upgraded version of our Lord and Savior! We proclaim the unchanging revelation of God Himself. We have received a unique, unrepeatable disclosure of the eternal God, who is changeless and immutable.

The Lord God, ever the same, acted “once for all” (vs. 3). He delivered to His apostles an unchanging Way, giving Life and Truth to all human beings in every time, place, and circumstance. When the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council declared their support for the Church’s use of icons, they could boldly declare: “This is the faith of the apostles, this is the faith of the Fathers, this is the faith of the Orthodox, this is the faith which has established the universe.”

What bearing does the changelessness of our faith have on our conduct during the Lenten fast? Orthodoxy is our rock amidst the surging tides and currents, through the earth-shaking events that roil the seas of life. Placed in the midst of this storm is the season of Lent, a God-given opportunity to afix our anchor on the solid rock of the “inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away” (1 Pt 1:4).

God gives us these forty days to recognize and renew our anchor in the unchanging One. May God open our eyes so that we may “see the true light,” spread our hearts wide, and “receive the heavenly Spirit.” May He aid us in establishing Christ as the sure basis of our life, as we “[worship] the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

In the present passage, Jude urges us to “contend . . . for the faith” (Jude 3). “Contend,” in the original Greek, is the same verb used to describe combat to death in the Roman arenas. The deepest purpose of human existence, the source of life for every Christian, lies in our unwavering faith. We are not called to defend an abstract set of propositions or formulas devised by the Church. We battle for our eternal existence as persons.

Within our minds, we experience life as a constant flood of turbulent thoughts. Now, the Lord bids us to stabilize the vessel of our soul and still this inner turbulence. For, as Christ warns, “out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man” (Mt 15:19-20).

First and foremost, then, Lent is a time for interior struggle, for cutting off our thoughts and passions. For example, Evagrius suggests that “the thought of giving hospitality to gain human recognition [may be] cut off when a better thought comes, which prompts us to be hospitable for the Lord’s sake.” Let us use the time of the fast to reorder our thoughts, laying down a new beginning and gaining the skills to contend for the faith which was “once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

O Lord, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit. –Western Rite Liturgy

February 18 - Wednesday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
Reading for Sixth Hour – Joel 2:12-26

The Work of the Fast, continued – To Repent from the Heart: Joel 2:12-26, especially vs. 13: “Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is longsuffering and plenteous in mercy and repents of evils.” In this pre-Lenten Old Testament reading, the Prophet Joel calls God’s people to repentance. To help us embrace this deep change of heart as our God-pleasing goal, the prophet describes four outcomes of true repentance.

First, we are able to identify our evil thoughts and passions. We then accept responsibility for the calamities our sins have caused. We acknowledge that God is “zealous for His land” but has “spared His people” (vs. 18). Finally, we thank God for “restor[ing] to [us] the years the grasshopper and the locust have eaten” (vs. 25).

We pay a high price for our evil thoughts and uncontrolled passions, for they enslave and wither away our humanity. As Saint Gregory of Nyssa explains, “Man, who once lived in the delights of Paradise, has been transplanted into this unhealthy and wearisome place, where his life, once accustomed to impassibility, became instead subject to passion and corruption. [Sin] occupies the castle of the soul like a tyrant. . . .

“For the whole array of passions, wrath and fear, cowardice and impudence, depression as well as pleasure, hatred, strife and merciless cruelty, envy as well as flattery, brutality together with brooding over injuries, they are all so many despotic masters” (*The Lord’s Prayer and the Beatitudes*, p. 113-114).

Indeed, the passions are fierce adversaries who turn us into a *reproach* (vss. 17, 19). They befoul the good name we received in Christ. No wonder God calls us to repent: “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your garments” (vss. 12-13).

The Prophet Joel places God’s offer of mercy before us; we are given another chance at fellowship and life with God. According to Saint John Climacus, “Repentance is the renewal of baptism. Repentance is a contract with God for a second life. A penitent is a buyer of humility” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.1, p. 54).

Joel’s prophecy presents the icon of repentance to us, as the community of God’s people, so that we may embrace this vision and become genuine penitents. Lent is a time for the priests to “sound the trumpet . . . [and] gather the people” (vss. 15-16). This summons includes the aged, infants, and even the newlyweds who set aside their nuptial joys (vs. 16).

Together as God’s people, we weep for our sins. We stand before the altar and cry, “O Lord, spare Your people, do not give Your inheritance to reproach” (vs. 17).

God in turn declares that He will answer King David’s plea and turn His “face away from [our] sins and blot out all [our] iniquities” (Ps. 50:9). The Lord does not desire the death of sinners, but that we should live, for the Prophet Joel reminds us that “the Lord our God . . . is merciful and compassionate . . . long-suffering and plenteous in mercy” (Joel 2:13).

Let us “be of good courage; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things” (vs. 21)! God “will shower [us] as before with the early and the late rain” when we struggle to repent (vs. 23). He “will restore to [us] the years” eaten away by sins like blight (vs. 25).

“Repentance which takes place in deep mourning and joined with confession is what unveils the eyes of the soul to see the great things of God,” according to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 142). Repentance is our supreme work during the Great Fast, enabling us to “praise the name of the Lord [our] God for what He has so wondrously done unto [us]” (vs. 26). Let us rend our hearts and turn to the compassionate Lord!

Grant, O Lord, that we may complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance, having a pure conscience unto remission of sins. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 19 – Thursday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
Jude 11-25

The Work of the Fast – Reordering Our Lives: *Jude 11-25, especially vss. 20-21:* “*But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.*” So that we may begin to reorder our life in Christ, Saint Jude directs us to “keep [ourselves] in the love of God” (vs. 21). This means that we do His will with love, living contrary to those “who . . . deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 4).

To remain “in the love of God” requires us to reject the ways of “ungodly sinners” (vs. 15), strengthening ourselves against the influence of “sensual persons” (vs. 19) through fasting. In verses 4-16 of this reading, Saint Jude lists twenty-four different vices of these “mockers . . . who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts” (vs. 18).

Such people are deceitful, lewd, atheistic, and reject Christ (vs. 4); agnostic (vs. 5); schismatic (vs. 6); immoral (vs. 7); unruly, insolent, and impure (vs. 8); blasphemous (vs. 10); greedy, rebellious, and faithless (vs. 11); barren, lifeless, irreverent, and arid (vs. 12); boisterous and insubstantial (vs. 13); self-serving, flattering, grandiose, and grumbling (vs. 16).

This list offers a tragic account of the consequences when we “walk according to . . . ungodly lusts” (vs. 18). We withdraw from divine love by choice; we become immoral, defy God-given authority, and separate ourselves from the “most holy faith” (vs. 20).

Yet despite such wickedness, no one is beyond the love of God! Such rejection would run contrary to the Lord’s loving nature (1 Jn 4:16), “for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt 5:45). Honestly, where would we be if God did not love sinners?

If we know someone who deliberately walls himself off from the love of God through his attitudes and behavior, he is truly to be pitied. Saint Jude urges us to “have compassion” in such cases (vs. 22), through our prayers and love “pulling them out of the fire” (vs. 23).

The Apostle’s twofold message is that we must “contend earnestly for the faith” (vs. 3) and “keep ourselves in the love of God” (vs. 21). As the Lent approaches, we have an opportunity to examine our lives in order to avoid indulging in the sins and character flaws listed above – to avoid separating ourselves from the love of God.

What if we fall short? We may repent from the heart, purify ourselves, and by the grace of God resume the struggle for godliness.

Surely immorality must “not even be named among [us], as is fitting for saints” (Eph 5:3). As the Apostle Paul commands, “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God” (Rom 13:1). Within the Church, we find good cause to uphold those who lead us.

Also, let us carefully examine the areas of our lives where we find difficulty living according to the faith. Let us seek out the godly counsel of our priests, being reverent and “fruitful in every good work” (Col 1:10).

Saint Jude encourages us in this process of “building [ourselves] up on [our] most holy faith” (Jude 20). Indeed, the Great Fast is God’s gift to us, allowing us to renew true worship, meditate on Scripture, receive the holy Gifts devoutly, pray regularly, fast in company with the Church, and give alms to the needy. Above all, let us find ways to love our brethren in our Church and family, including those living in the world who hunger for the love of God.

Grant me, O Christ, a watchful mind, a prudent reason, a vigilant heart, a faithful will to keep Thy commandments, giving Thy servant sufficient grace to glorify Thee always. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 20 - Friday of Cheesefare Week (Week before Lent)
Reading for Sixth Hour – Zechariah 8:7-17

The Work of the Fast, continued – Use the Time Diligently: Zechariah 8:7-17, especially vs. 15: *“Now in these days I have prepared and purposed to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; be of good courage.”* God challenges us in these verses to “strengthen [our] hands” (vs. 13) for His new epoch. In other words He tells us, “Do not hold back, but be diligent, for a new era has come.”

In former times all diligence was futile, for “there [was] no peace for those going out and those coming in” (vs. 10). Hence the Lord gives us a new promise: “I do not do to the remnant of this people as in the former days” (vs. 11). Here God is assuring us that during His new epoch our state will improve. Our industry and diligence will profit us, for God says, “I have prepared and purposed to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; be of good courage” (vs. 15).

This ancient message is for all of us who belong to Christ. Imagine the situation of a people who had lived under repressive conditions for many years. Suddenly, the social, political, economic, and spiritual conditions change for the better. But do we always find new conditions in life to be golden, when they come after hard years?

No – in fact, some facets of our life may now become more difficult. However, under new conditions, our *strong hands* and diligence are more likely to be rewarded than laziness and lassitude. When God announces a new era in Christ, He is not offering us a bailout program. Our situation is far better if we meet these new conditions with determined effort.

Yes, this word of Lord prophesied by Zechariah is intended for us, especially as we stand at the threshold of the Great Fast. The prophet’s message reminds us to embrace the new era with diligence and hope.

What were our prior conditions, and what are the new circumstances that God has effected? Under the old conditions, our *wages* did not profit us. No one wanted to purchase our *livestock*. Under the former conditions we found no peace, whether going out or coming in, for we were pitted “each against [our] neighbor” (vs. 10). War and conflict prevailed. Certainly, this is a situation we know all too well. But God has created a new set of conditions.

Of the previous time, when we lived separately from the grace of God, Saint Paul exclaims: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). Sin still holds sway in the world, leading the Prophet David to pray: “Deliver my soul from ungodly men . . . yea, with Thy hidden treasures hath their belly been filled. They have satisfied themselves with swine and have left the remnants to their babes” (Ps 16:13-15). Indeed, there are wages for sin, and recompense will follow the workers of evil.

We live under new circumstances, however, for “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Our Savior’s invitation stands: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). We can turn away from sin and receive refreshment. Let us therefore make our hands strong for the things of God.

The Apostle Paul asks: “What fruit did you have then in those things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death” (Rom 6:21). Yet he also says, “But now having been set free from sin . . . you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (vs. 6:22). Christ created a set of new circumstances for us by taking on flesh and trampling down death. Let us use the time of Lent with good courage and strength of hands, to “speak truth” and “judge truth,” for then Christ will bless us (see Zec 8:13, 16).

O all-good Master, grant us to undertake the coming fast diligently, pass our days with a seemly disposition, and always lead a virtuous life that Thy kingdom of goodness, righteousness and peace may come upon us.

February 21 – Cheesefare Saturday (Week before Lent)
Romans 14:19-23

The Work of the Fast, continued – To Edify Others: *Romans 14:19-23; 16:25-27, especially vs. 19*: “*Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.*” At Christmas, Theophany, and Pascha, we rejoice that “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). We declare that we have left behind our limited individual existence and entered into the corporate life in Christ, who comes to us from above.

According to Metropolitan John Zizioulas, the Church “is formed from out of ordinary existence through a radical conversion from individualism to personhood. As death and resurrection in Christ, baptism signifies the decisive passing of our existence from the ‘truth’ of individualized being into the truth of personal being.”

Our former individual existence depended on birth. Now, however, a “new birth is required . . . so that each baptized person can himself become ‘Christ,’ his existence being one of communion and hence of true life” (*Being as Communion*, p. 113).

These words are no mere sentimental assurances, nor do they commend us simply to have warm feelings toward others. Rather, Zizioulas is describing our God-given interdependence with every person who is a member of the Church. We cannot grasp what the Apostle Paul is saying in today’s verses from Romans, unless our understanding is grounded in the corporate life of the Church.

The apostle admonishes us to exhibit concern for others in everything we do and work for. The *peace* we are to pursue is not simply an end to quarreling and strife, nor does it mean pleasant inner quiet for the individual. Saint Paul calls us to embrace the well-being of every spiritual and social relationship that flourishes within the Body of Christ, whether it involves God or our fellow members.

As the apostle presses us to bring peace and to edify one another, he underscores the fact that being passively present amidst others is not enough. By using the verb “pursue” in verse 19, he conveys the need for our active attention and participation. Is someone grieving? Who is faltering in his faith? Who is confused, offended, or in need? What is to be done in such situations? We are to “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (vs. 19)!

The Lenten fast, which will soon be upon us, is not our individual business, but rather the labor of the whole Body of Christ. Let us commit to a blessed fast for our brothers and sisters. To express this commitment, many of our parishes begin the fast by celebrating Forgiveness Vespers. This service discloses the mutual love that bonds us together during the fast, especially if we continue to live it thereafter.

What is the “work of God” (vs. 20) to which Saint Paul refers? Is it not the health of the heart, soul, mind, and body of every member, as well as the health of the entire fellowship? Truly, we are a *koinonia* (communion) called together to witness to the world.

Let us look upon our fellow members in Christ with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit is alive in the breast of each person. What an ineffable mystery! Let us refuse to injure others by the manner in which we fast. We must not neglect our common action, nor do as we please. If we flaunt our piety or accuse others of doing wrong, we fall under apostolic judgment, for “if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love” (vs. 15)!

As Lent begins, let us bear in mind that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (vs. 23). We labor so that all may have a holy Lent, and so that we may give to others a royal blessing.

Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance: preserve the fullness of Thy Church. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 22 – Cheesefare (Forgiveness) Sunday
Romans 13:11-14:4

The Work of the Fast, continued – Putting on the Lord Jesus: *Romans 13:11-14:4, especially vs. 14:* “*But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.*” One thing must be said about fasting: if we are to sustain the practice faithfully, we must remain aware of how we behave with respect to food. Questions about what and how much to eat will confront us not only at mealtimes, but also during our breaks at work, at business lunches, in the homes of friends, in the market, at the gas station, and before those tempting vending machines.

If we wish to keep the fast, we must consciously open ourselves up to a myriad of impulses not normally denied – pleasures we usually enjoy without a thought, for they are habitual actions. Suddenly, we notice food displays in magazines, billboards promoting delicious treats, and television commercials showing us what we are missing.

Along with these reminders come the ready rationalizations. Our emotions surprise us with their insistence, and little voices begin to interrupt our train of thought. All of this turns abstinence into work, as we struggle with an increased awareness of what fasting is costing us.

We may be tempted to consider fasting as an uncomfortable discipline that we maintain only until relief comes at Pascha. However, in the synaxarion reading for Cheesefare Sunday, we receive these helpful instructions from the Church.

“The divine Fathers set the anniversary of the exile of Adam from the paradise of bliss on this day, to show us by deed as well as word how great is the benefit that accrues to man from fasting; and, on the contrary, how great the harm that comes from destructive gluttony and from disobedience to the divine commandments.”

We are urged to “hasten to the subjugation of the flesh by abstinence, as we approach the divine battlefield . . . of blameless fasting.” Let us, then, “begin the season of fasting with rejoicing, giving ourselves to spiritual strife, purifying soul and body, fasting from passions as we fast from foods, faring on the virtues of the Spirit.”

In today’s epistle, the Apostle Paul speaks like an officer addressing his troops. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” he says, “and make no provision for the flesh” (vs. 14). To help us understand how “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ” relates to the Lenten fast, let us review four other elements of Saint Paul’s counsel: waking up, casting off, putting on the armor of light, and walking properly.

By fasting, we aim to discover how far we have fallen into spiritual sleep and the unthinking acquiescence to our desires. Whatever stirs in our consciousness as we fast sounds an alarm. What habits and routines do we indulge, as if we are sleepwalkers? With our Lenten disciplines, Christ is shaking us awake. Let us rise (vs. 11)!

Consider the *works of darkness*: revelry, drunkenness, lewdness, lusts, strife, and envy (vss. 12-13). Have we adopted any of these, even in thought? The fast discloses the darkness inside us so we may off every trace of indulgence and deepen our relationship with the Lord.

Christ shines in the purified heart just as He did on Mount Tabor (Lk 9:28-29). Radiating wisdom, He reveals what we need to surrender to Him. May His uncreated light become our armor against the darkness on every side (Rom 13:12).

Finally, let us apply ourselves to the virtues. Saint Paul tells us to “walk properly” (vs. 13), following the ways of the Lord Jesus. Let us determine to make His thoughts our thoughts, His words our words, His will our will, His commandments our habits. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ!” Such an endeavor will require practice. We may expect some failure, but let us persist in the effort!

May our prayer and fasting flood us with Thine uncreated light, O Benefactor of all! – Forgiveness Vespers

February 23 – Clean Monday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 1:1-13

God Said “Let There Be”: *Genesis 1:1-13, especially vs. 1:* “*In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth.*” Genesis calls us to faith in God – to trust Him and commit to Him. These demands defy human intuition, surpassing every human vision and the insights of the philosophers. Genesis is God’s revelation of Himself, recorded for us by the Prophet Moses. Saint Basil says of Moses: “It is this man, whom God judged worthy to behold Him, face to face, like the angels, who imparts to us what he has learned from God. Let us listen to these words of truth written without the help of the *enticing words of man’s wisdom* (1 Cor 2:4)” (*Hexameron* 1.1, *NPNF*, Second Series, Vol. VIII, p. 52).

Indeed, during Lent we are to read and feast on Moses’ record of God’s self-revelation. Saint Basil blesses what the Church sets before us at weekday vespers during the Great Fast. The title of this book, Genesis, means “origin,” and Moses records many origins that arose according to the will of God. In the first week of Lent the Church focuses on the origin of the created order and especially on the origin of mankind – including the realities of sin and death that hover over our race.

Genesis begins with God’s creation of the heaven and the earth. God speaks; and as Saint Basil says, “The order was itself an operation, and a state of things was brought into being, than which man’s mind cannot even imagine a pleasanter one for our enjoyment” (*Hexameron* 2.7, p. 63). We learn a great deal about God, though much concerning Him shall ever remain shrouded in mystery. We encounter the eternal One who is the Lord of history. We discover that God is indeed “everywhere present and fillest all things,” yet quite distinct from His creation.

God is the prime actor in the Genesis account. He is disclosed as the Creator Who *made* the heaven and the earth (Gn 1:1). The Word of God is effective, unlike human words that are nothing but sounds. “Then God said . . . and there was . . .” (vs. 3). All things are brought into being through the spoken, creative Word of God, “and without Him nothing was made that was made” (Jn 1:3).

The revelation of the Trinity is embedded in the present passage, although God as three Persons is not manifested explicitly. The triune God does not manifest Himself fully until His theophany at the baptism of the Lord Jesus. Yet our Christian faith affirms that all three Persons create: the Word of God the Father spoke all things into being while “the Spirit of God was hovering over the . . . water” (Gn 1:2).

God is also disclosed in today’s passage as Lord of history. Note the opening line: “In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth” (vs. 1). First, there will come an end to the time of creation just as there is a beginning. Creation is not an endless cycle of being and extinguishing – it is a history that unfolds in time. Saint Basil notes: “The dogmas of the end, and of the renewing of the world, are announced beforehand in these short words put at the head of the inspired history” (*Hexameron* 1.3, p. 53). That which began in time will come to an end in time. Bishop Kallistos Ware explains, “God is making the world. . . . Creation is not an event in the past but a relationship in the present” (*The Orthodox Way*, p. 57). The Word holds us in being, and as a result we exist!

Finally, God manifests Himself as “other than” His creation. Pantheism is nullified, for God creates from nothing; He neither shapes nor manipulates what already exists. As Bishop Kallistos notes, “God was under no compulsion to create” (p. 56). Rather, as we hear in the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, “Thou it was who didst bring us from non-existence into being.” The created order is *made* by God “out of nothing” (2 Mac 7:28). The secularists who would evade the fact of creation by dwelling on galactic forces fail to touch on the origins of the universe. Instead, according to Saint Basil, they disclose an “inherent atheism . . . that nothing is governed . . . and that all was given up to chance.”

Glory and praise to God, the supreme artificer of all that is wisely and skillfully made. –based on *Hexameron* 1.11

February 24 – First & Second Discoveries of the Head of the Forerunner 2 Corinthians 4:6-15

The Great Miracle: 2 Corinthians 4:6-15, especially vs.6: “...God...has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” How should we understand this statement? The Apostle is speaking of illumination, the action of God associated with the enlightenment the Lord gives in Baptism: to be “...freed from slavery to sin and the devil and...united with God.” Experience and the Holy Fathers agree, however, that our spiritual light can become darkened after receiving the Christian Mystery. As Saint John of Sinai points out, “All demons try to darken our mind, and then they suggest what they like.” We certainly experience such darkening, and let us heartily agree that the impure spirits are effective!

Gregory Palamas points out that he who “...recognizes his heart’s impurity, and is not filled with pride because of the partial degree of purity he has attained, but uses it as an aid...will see more clearly the impurity of the other powers of his soul and will progress in humility, his inward grief will grow, and he will find suitable ways of healing each of his soul’s powers.”

Thus, the great miracle of illumination, with its attendant freedom from slavery to evil, is useful for moving toward full enlightenment and theosis. God does not quit the field of the contest for our souls, nor do the demons readily give up; yet we need not succumb to the sin of despair, nor lose the hope of salvation nor of gaining full “...knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (vs. 6). Let us choose the exceedingly great miracle of illumination!

The personal ‘knowledge’ of Christ that God imparts in the Baptismal Mystery is meant to dominate our hearts and souls as it does Saint Paul and the Forerunner John. They knew Christ actively, having been acquainted with Him. They flowered and bore fruit because His Divine light filled them. Likewise, when we meet Jesus Christ face to face, in our hearts, we discern His glory as God and Savior, even if imperfectly. We can experience the miracle of illumination.

Having an active, ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ strengthens us for all aspects of life. That is a great miracle! Think how few know God’s glory in the person of Jesus Christ! Muslims do not; Buddhists do not; secularists do not, so many, too many, do not. Blessed is the man who shall “...bring forth...fruit in its season...” (Ps. 1:3).

Saint Paul outlines the miracle of knowing Jesus Christ: even when we are ‘hard pressed’ on every side, we need not be ‘crushed’ nor ‘perplexed.’ We can avoid being ‘in despair, and even be “...persecuted, but not forsaken...” (2 Cor. 4:8,9)! How? We possess Christ, the available miracle within us! John the Forerunner was arrested and jailed to silence him from telling the truth; yet, when he was ‘struck down’ and beheaded, he still was “...not destroyed...” (vs. 9).

The heart of the miracle of illumination lies between each of us and Christ our King and God, for He died, yet rose triumphing over death. Therefore, if we will work at preserving unity with the living and Life-Giving Christ, more and more we will be “...carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (vs. 10). . Of course, the choice is ours: will we prize union with Christ so highly that we will even surrender our will and desires “...to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (vs. 11)?

Archimandrite Sophrony urges us to remember, “....our nature can be recast only in the fire of repentance. Only tearful prayer will destroy the roots of passion in us. Only invocation of the Name of Jesus can cleanse, regenerate and hallow our nature.” “Abide in Me...” (Jn. 15:4). And how can we abide? This is what blessed Sophrony answers:

“O Lord Jesus Christ, Who only art without sin, have mercy upon me, a sinner.”

February 25 - Clean Wednesday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 1:24-2:3

God Said “Let Us Make Man”: *Genesis 1:24-2:3, especially vss. 26-27:* “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. Let them have dominion. . . . So God made man; in the image of God He made him; male and female He made them.’” We continue to examine God’s unfolding revelation of Himself in the account of the sixth day of the creation process. Here God discloses Himself as personal and in relationship to man, who is made in his Creator’s image. Man, therefore, is also a person capable of relationships – a being with whom God, the Ruler of all, shapes the dominion of what He has brought into being.

In verses 26-27, there is a significant pause in the narrative as God reflects within Himself, i.e., among the three divine Persons. Up to this point God simply creates by saying, “Let there be” (vs. 14) or “Let the earth bring forth” (vs. 24). Whatever He names then comes into being. However, in these two verses God first proposes (“Let Us make man” - vs. 26) and then acts: “So God made man” (vs. 27). The use of the pronoun “Us” further reveals creation as the work of an interpersonal and relational Being. God proposes, deliberates, and communicates among the Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three Persons, in a relationship of communion with one another, is an appropriate description of God the Creator.

Since man is fashioned in the image of God, these facts concerning God’s nature have immense consequence for us as relational beings. When man is made in the image of God, according to Metropolitan John Zizoulas, “he exists, he takes on God’s ‘way of being.’ God’s way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man ‘accomplishes.’ It is a way of ‘relationship’ with the world, with other people, and with God, an event of *communion*” (*Being as Communion*, p. 15). This way of being may be fully attained only within the life of the Church, as an “ecclesial fact.” As Saint Gregory of Nyssa says, “There is nothing remarkable in man being the image and likeness of the universe: for the earth passes away, the sky changes, and all that is contained therein is as transient as that which contains it” (Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, p. 70).

What do we mean by the terms *person* and *personal*? Based on the fact that we are made in God’s image – and knowing that He creates, deliberates, proposes, decides, and communicates – we understand that human beings are likewise persons with the capacity to do these sorts of things. What is remarkable about mankind is that each and every man bears within his breast what Saint Gregory the Theologian calls a “divine particle” that confers self-awareness and a modicum of freedom of choice.

Man also is relational, as Zizoulas further indicates. Because God is both communion and diversity, we are complete only in relationship. We are made for communion. This fact is the underpinning of our creation as male and female in the image of God (vs. 27). Let us recognize, therefore, that gender diversity is not merely natural, but supranatural. Furthermore, we do not find completion merely in physical union but in spiritual communion with God.

Finally, mankind’s God-given mission is set forth: “Let them have *dominion* over . . . all the earth” (vs. 28). Respect and care for God’s creation is implicit in this dual extension of *dominion* and *blessing*. God has called us into being to bless the world, transfiguring it for communion with Him. As Saint Diadochos of Photiki states: “Our likeness to God requires our cooperation. We are to work with God in bringing blessing to the created order” (Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 742). “But man shall go forth unto his work, and to his labor until the evening” (Ps 103:25).

“*Thou hast made [man] a little lower than the angels; with glory and honor hast Thou crowned him, and Thou has set him over the works of Thy hands.*” – Psalm 8:5

February 26 – Clean Thursday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 2:4-19

God Charges Mankind: Genesis 2:4-19, especially 16-17: “And the Lord God commanded Adam saying, ‘You may eat food from every tree in the garden; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you many not eat; for in whatever day you eat from it, you shall die by death.’” According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, “The Holy Fathers tell us that God became man in order that through His becoming man He might again raise up human nature into the blessed state” that was ours before the transgression of Adam. Saint Symeon continues, “Therefore, we must know in what way it is that man, through the economy of Christ’s incarnation, may again come into that blessed state” (“The Sin of Adam” in Manley, *The Lament of Eve*, p. 15).

The starting point for the Fathers, from which they understand mankind’s original state, is the sixth day of creation (vss. 1:24-31). Today’s reading expands our understanding of that day. We learn that man, along with every “living creature according to its kind” (vs. 1:24), is brought forth “out of dust from the ground” (vs. 2:7). “All that is produced,” says Saint John of Damascus, is “subject to change. . . . For those things must be subject to change whose production has its origin in change,” for they are “brought into being out of nothing . . . transforming a substratum of matter into something different” (“Exposition of the Orthodox Faith” in *Lament of Eve*, p. 14).

How, then, did God intend for man to change? Man differs from other living creatures in that “God . . . breathed in his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (vs. 2:7). As we learned yesterday, man is thus made according to the image and likeness of God (vs. 1:26). He simultaneously imposes a law on man, not to taste of the tree of knowledge. If man, says Saint John of Damascus, “should preserve the dignity of the soul by giving the victory to reason, and acknowledging his Creator, and observing His command, he should share eternal blessedness and live to all eternity, proving mightier than death. But if he should subject the soul to the body, comparing himself in ignorance of his true dignity to the senseless beasts, and shaking off his Creator’s yoke, and neglecting His divine injunction, he will be liable to death and corruption, and will be compelled to labor throughout a miserable life” (*Lament of Eve*, p. 14).

God places man in a garden of paradise “to tend and keep it” (vs. 2:15), honoring him with the gift of free will. Saint Gregory the Theologian explains, “He desired that man might belong to Him as the result of his choice.” Our freedom is a gift, for where there is no choice there can be no love. Love and free choice partake of an interpersonal truth. Saint Gregory explains that God gave man a commandment so that he would have “material for his free will to act upon. This law was a commandment as to what plants he might partake of, and which one he might not touch. . . . Not however, because it was evil. . . . It would have been good if partaken of at the proper time, for the tree was . . . contemplation, upon which it is only safe for those who have reached maturity of habit to enter, but which is not good for those who are still somewhat simple and greedy in their habit” (“Oration on the Theophany,” *Lament of Eve*, p. 18).

When Christ our God became incarnate, the image of God was manifest clearly to mankind once again, that we might turn back to our Creator. However, this return happens only after we “have got rid of all foreign matter that has affected our soul, and can show it in the simplicity as it was made,” according to Saint Athanasios. Upon seeing Christ, he says, the soul is brightened as it “beholds in a mirror the image of the Father, whose image the Savior is” (“Against the Heathen,” *Lament of Eve*, p. 19).

Illumine our hearts, O Master, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge. – Prayer Before the Gospel Reading

February 27 - Clean Friday (First Week of Great Lent)
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 2:20-3:20

Return to the Ground: Genesis 2:20-3:20, especially vss. 3:17, 19: “*To Adam He said. . . ‘Earth you are and to earth you shall return.’*” How well we seem to know Adam and Eve! Their portraits might be placed in a family album, for we see how readily they fit in with our pictures of parents and grandparents, children and grandchildren. We are truly members of their family!

Indeed, let us also look into our own hearts as we read, for there we shall see Christ our God. He too is present at these events, in the giving and losing of Paradise, even as He is with us now. The pre-incarnate Christ causes Adam to fall asleep. He forms the woman and brings her to the man. He commands them not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. He walks in the garden, looking for His errant loved ones. He fashions us still, and lays His hand upon us: “And from Thy presence whither shall I flee? If I go up into heaven, Thou art there; if I go down into hades, Thou art present there” (Ps 138:6-7). He was with our primal parents, and we likewise may “grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27).

“Thus God brought a trance upon Adam, and he slept” (Gn 2:21). Saint Augustine of Hippo explains, “Adam sleeps, so Eve may be formed; Christ dies, so the Church will be formed” (*Homily 9 on John*, NPNF First Series, vol. 7, pp. 66). Christ makes us one with Him in the holy mysteries, so that His precious blood may course through us to eternal life. Nicholas Cabasilas avows that “in this sacrament we attain God Himself, and God Himself is made one with us” (Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 146).

Having formed the woman, Christ our God brings her to Adam for marriage, in a simple procession of innocence. Later, having taken our flesh upon Himself, He repeats Adam’s prophetic words at creation: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh” (Gn 2:24; Mt 19:5). By His presence at this very first marriage feast, He declares wedlock to be a holy and honorable estate: “The two were naked, both Adam and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Gn 2:25).

The cunning serpent then approaches the innocent ones. He comes with questions, insinuations, and suggestions. Centuries later, he comes again with probings, and enticements to the Son of God, the second Adam. But when he meets Christ Jesus, Satan finds his temptations spurned – Christ does not sin. The first man and woman, however, turn away from truth and life and enter into delusion and corruption.

“Then they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden that afternoon, and Adam and his wife hid themselves . . . from the presence of the Lord God” (vs. 3:8). No one who is full of sin can stand in the presence of the pure and uncreated Light. Our God is “a fire, consuming the unworthy” (pre-communion prayer of Saint Symeon Metaphrastes). Yet He comes to all who are fallen with Adam in order to restore us to life. He forgives, and bids us to “sin no more” (Jn 8:11). It is time we learn how to refuse the questions and enticements of the liar and embrace Life instead.

The only begotten Son of God knew that He would come in the flesh to restore mankind, so He warns the serpent that the woman’s seed “shall bruise your head, and you shall be on guard for His heel” (Gn 3:15). We see this promise fulfilled when Christ tramples down death by death after the Crucifixion. He breaks the gates of hades, raising Adam and Eve from their tombs and bestowing eternal life upon mankind once again.

Thou wast verily nailed upon the Cross, O Life of all; and was numbered among the dead, O deathless Lord. Thou didst rise after three days, O Savior, and didst raise Adam from corruption. – Orthros Verse, Tone One

February 28 – Saturday of the First Week of Lent
Hebrews 1:1-12

God Has Spoken: *Hebrews 1:1-12, especially vss. 1-2:* “*God . . . has in these last days spoken to us by His Son. . . .*” In the opening verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Saint Paul presents God’s declarations concerning His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the destiny of every human being will be ultimately determined (Rom 6:21-23). Let us search within ourselves honestly now, to understand how these declarations apply to us.

First, God declares that the Lord Jesus is “heir of all things” (Heb 1:2). *All things* includes what the Prophet David foretold: “I will give Thee the nations for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession” (Ps 2:8). Every human authority and every person in history will answer to Christ. Are we preparing for His coming judgment?

God reveals that Christ Jesus is the Creator of all, “through whom . . . He made the worlds” (vs. 2) and everything we know and see: time, space, all of humanity. The Child of the Theotokos made each of us. How are we fulfilling the purpose for which He created us?

God calls the Lord Jesus “the brightness of His glory” (vs. 3). He is bright because He is the radiant light of God Himself, illumining the whole world and those who will receive Him as “Light of Light.” Do we glory in the Lord, or only in ourselves (1 Cor 1:31)?

God informs us that Jesus Christ is “the express image” of His Person (Heb 1:3). Thus, in the Lord Jesus we see the face of God (Jn 14:9). Are we keeping faith with the apostles, who heard, saw with their eyes, and handled with their own hands Christ Jesus, the Word of eternal life? They declared that we enjoy fellowship with them and “with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:1-3). Do we honor this fellowship?

When God says that the Lord Jesus upholds “all things by the word of His power” (Heb 1:3), we must ask ourselves how grateful we are to be upheld. He holds our life in the balance, permits us to continue breathing, and enables us to move and act – do we acknowledge Him?

God the Father declares that He is “in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses” (2 Cor 5:19). Christ our God has “Himself purged our sins” (Heb 1:3). Do we truly confess my sins and receive the Lord’s purification in the sacrament of confession?

The Prophet David was told that God would seat one of his own descendants at “the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3). To what extent do we submit to Christ as Ruler of all? Do we perhaps prefer to “rely in [our] own discernment” (Prv 3:7)?

As a man, Jesus has “obtained a more excellent name than” any angel (Heb 1:4). Furthermore, God calls Christ “His Son” (vs. 2). How well do we sustain our union with Christ as our Lord and prove ourselves worthy children of His kingdom?

God also calls Jesus the One “I have begotten” (vs. 5). We know the angels worship Him day and night. Do we also worship Christ as our only King and God at all times? God declares that Jesus Christ our Lord loves *righteousness*, which is the *scepter* of His kingdom (vss. 8). Do we love and pursue righteousness?

God “has anointed [Jesus] with the oil of gladness more than [His] companions” (vs. 9). To what extent do we count ourselves as joyful companions among the faithful of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

God informs us that Jesus Christ will “fold . . . up” the heavens and the earth at the end of time (vs. 12). On that day, what will we say before His dread judgment seat?

O come, let us worship and fall down before Christ. Save us, O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, who sing unto Thee. Alleluia! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom