Prot. No. 119

CATECHETICAL HOMILY
For the Opening of Holy and Great Lent

+ BARTHOLOMEW
By God's mercy Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome
and Ecumenical Patriarch
To the Plenitude of the Church
May the grace and peace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ;
and from us, prayer, blessing, and forgiveness.

Most honorable brother Hierarchs and blessed children in the Lord,

Filled with sacred emotion, we enter once again, by God's goodwill, into Holy and Great Lent, the arena of ascetic struggle, the time of fasting and repentance, of humility and prayer, of spiritual vigilance and love, with the eyes of our heart directed to the life-giving Cross of the Lord, which guides us all toward Holy Pascha that opens the gates of Paradise to the human race.

This blessed period now opening before us constitutes an opportunity to comprehend once more the truth of asceticism according to Christ and its inseparable association with the Eucharistic realization of the Church, whose every expression and dimension is illumined by the light and joy of the Resurrection. The spirit of asceticism is hardly a foreign element introduced into Christianity, nor is it the result of influence by dualistic ideologies outside the Church. Asceticism is another word for the Christian existence, connecting it with absolute trust in Divine Providence, with the inexhaustible spiritual gladness of a life dedicated to Christ, with self-transcendence and self-offering, with charitable love and respect for all creation.

Asceticism is not a matter of self-willed choices and subjective particularities, but of submission to the rule and the "catholic experience" of the Church. It has been described as an "ecclesiastical" rather than an "individual" event. Life in the Church is indivisible. Repentance, prayer, humility, forgiveness, fasting, and philanthropic deeds are

interconnected and interwoven. In the Orthodox tradition, there is no asceticism as an end in itself, for that only leads to an overestimation of individual effort and feeds tendencies of self-justification.

Great Lent is the appropriate time to experience the Church as the place and the manner in which the gifts of divine Grace are revealed, always as a foretaste of the joy of the Lord's Resurrection, the cornerstone of our faith and the all-radiant horizon of "the hope within us." It is by divine inspiration that the Church honours on Cheesefare Saturday the sacred memory of saintly men and women who have shone brightly in asceticism, for they are the supporters and companions of the faithful in the long course of asceticism. In the arena of spiritual struggle, we have the benevolence of the Triune God with us, the protection of the All-Holy Mother of God and Mother of us all, and the intercessions of the saints and martyrs of the faith.

Healthy Christian asceticism is the participation of the whole human being—as a unity of spirit, soul, and body—in the life in Christ, without undervaluing matter and the body, and without a Manichaean reduction of spirituality. As it has been written, Christian asceticism is ultimately a struggle "not *against*, but *for* the body"; as the *Gerontikon* affirms: "We have been taught not to destroy the body, but to destroy the passions."

Unfortunately, and inaccurately, Christian asceticism has been labelled by contemporary thinkers as a denial of the joy of life and as a restriction of human creativity. Nothing could be further from the truth! As release from "having" and from attachment to the possession of things, and especially as liberation from the ego, from "seeking one's own," and from the "having of our being," asceticism is the source and expression of genuine freedom.

What can be more truthful than the exodus from the captivity of "individual right" and the openness and love for our fellow human beings, the inner "good change" and steadfastness in fulfilling God's commandments? What could be more creative than fasting, when it is a holistic attitude of life and expresses the ascetic and Eucharistic spirit of the Church, when it is a "common struggle" and not an "individual feat"? What could be more existentially striking than repentance and internal conversion, as a vital direction toward the truth and a renewed discovery

of the power of divine Grace, of the depth of life in Christ and the hope of eternal life?

It is truly impressive that, when the early Christian character of Holy and Great Lent as a period of preparation for Holy Baptism in the Divine Liturgy of the Resurrection was replaced by the "ethos of repentance," there nevertheless remained its experience as a "second baptism." For this reason, the period of fasting and repentance is not sorrowful. Our hymnology speaks of the "spring of fasting," while theology calls Great Lent a "spiritual spring" and a "period of joy and light." All of this assumes special timeliness and significance in the face of the anthropological confusion of our time, as well as the new alienations rooted in contemporary civilization.

With these sentiments and thoughts, reminding all the children of the Holy Great Church of Christ throughout the Lord's dominion, that on the day of the Akathist Hymn, the festivities will culminate, marking the 1400th anniversary of the year 626—when, in expression of gratitude to the Theotokos for the deliverance of the City of Constre from a perilous siege, the Akathist Hymn was chanted standing in the sacred Church of Blachernae—we wish you all a smooth course of the Fast, with asceticism and patience, with thanksgiving and doxology.

May we all, speaking the truth in love and being sanctified in the Lord, travel this way toward the fullness of joy in His radiant Resurrection.

Holy and Great Lent 2026
✠ **BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople**
Your fervent supplicant for all before God

To be read in churches on Cheesefare Sunday, 22 February 2026, immediately after the Holy Gospel.