

Great Lent and Pascha

The Feast of Feasts the Holy Pascha the Resurrection of the Lord-is the climax of the Church's liturgical year and is also the most glorious, most joyful and bright festival of the Christian Church. On it Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ arose as victor over death, destroying the power of death over man once and for all and annulling the curse pronounced upon man in Paradise. But, before the bright joy of Pascha, the Church has ordained a lengthy period of repentance and spiritual searching a period of preparation, so to speak the 40-day Great Lent.

The Forty Days of Great Lent commemorates Israel's forty years of wandering in the Wilderness the forty years of painful struggle as Israel longed for and then received entrance into the Promised Land (Ex. 16:35) Moses remained fasting on Mt. Sinai for forty days (Ex. 34:28) and the Prophet Elijah fasted for forty days as he journeyed to Mt. Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). Great Lent also recalls the forty days the Lord spent in the Wilderness after His Baptism, when He contended with Satan, the Temptor.

The time of Great Lent encompasses forty days, to which must be added Lazarus Saturday, Palm Sunday and Passion Week. In addition, the Holy Church prescribed three weeks of preparation for the Great Lent itself the Sundays of the Publican and the Pharisee, Prodigal Son, Meatfare and Cheesefare. In all, the Orthodox Church prescribes ten weeks of spiritual and bodily preparation for the joyous Pascha of the Lord.

The Date of Pascha.

The time of the Great Lent is dependent on the date of Pascha, which varies from year to year. According to a Canon of the First Ecumenical Council (Nicea 325), Holy Pascha is the first Sunday after the first Full Moon which falls upon or immediately after the Spring Equinox (according to ancient reckoning March 21). In addition, this Council decreed that Pascha cannot precede or fall on the Jewish Passover (14th day of the Month Nissan). The Full Moon used for the purposes of calculating the date of Pascha is the fourteenth day of a Lunar Month reckoned according to an ancient ecclesiastical computation and is not the actual astronomical Full Moon.

The number of days between each Full Moon (the Lunar Month) is not exact according to the Solar Calendar (usually about 29½ days) and ancient calendars added or subtracted a period called an epact to harmonize the Lunar and Solar Calendars. These epacts as calculated by the Orthodox Church, vary from those calculated by the Western Churches. In addition, the Western Churches do not follow the Nicene Council's decree that Pascha must not precede or fall on the Jewish Passover, and it is for these reasons that there is often a great variance from one year to the next

between the Orthodox Church and the Western Churches concerning the date of Holy Pascha.

Sundays of Preparation.

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee.

The first Sunday of Preparation (three weeks before the start of Great Lent) is the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, in which we are exhorted to true repentance and encouraged to follow the self-abasement of the Publican rather than the spiritual pride of the Pharisee. At the Matins Service we sing for the first time the beautiful Lenten hymn, Open to me the gates of repentance.../reminding us of the open gateway through which all must enter on the way to Pascha. We also note that this week is fast-free.

Sunday of the Prodigal Son.

The next Sunday of Preparation (two weeks before Great Lent) is the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, which reminds us that not only must we repent and undergo a change of heart, but that we must also exercise an act of will, in that we must get up and actually set off on our journey. In our own lives we can see a parallel; for how often do we repeat the cycle of the Prodigal son willful departure from God's house, a life of wantonness, misery at our fallen state, repentance, return to god the Father and divine forgiveness? On this Sunday, at the Matins Service we also sing the beautiful hymn of remembrance, By the waters of Babylon... (also sung the next two Sundays), reminding us of the heavenly Zion from which we have been exiled.

Sunday of Meatfare Sunday of the Last Judgment.

The next Sunday of Preparation, Meatfare Sunday, is the last day on which meat is permitted to be consumed until Holy Pascha. Otherwise, during the course of this week, on each day, all other animal products (including milk, cheese, eggs, butter, as well as fish) may be consumed. This is to remind us of the upcoming rigors of the Great Fast. The theme of this Sunday is the Last Judgment and the lot of those who turn from God, and those who return to Him.

Sunday of Cheesefare Forgiveness Sunday the Expulsion of Adam from Paradise.

The last Sunday before the Great Lent, Cheesefare Sunday, is also the last day of preparation. It is called Cheesefare because on the next day we begin a total fast from all animal products, as well as from fish, wine and oil (fish, wine and oil will be allowed only on the Feasts of the Annunciation and Palm Sunday), continuing until Holy Pascha. An important theme of this day is the Expulsion of Adam from Paradise, which reminds us of that from which we have fallen. Another theme is forgiveness, since we

cannot even begin our spiritual journey without granting forgiveness to those who have offended us and asking forgiveness of those whom we have offended. A special feature of this day is the very moving Forgiveness Vespers, at which we all ask and grant mutual forgiveness. At this Service, after the singing of the Great Prokeimenon, the liturgical vestments and furnishings are changed to dark colors, and the special Lenten melodies used.

Great Lent.

On the Monday following the Sunday of Cheesefare, we formally begin the 40-day Great Lent and, of course, one of its features is its rigorous fasting (cf. the section entitled Fasting in this chapter). In addition, there are some special features of the liturgical Services. The usual Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is not served on the weekdays of Great Lent (with the exception of the Feast of the Annunciation), but is replaced by the special Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, at which the faithful commune of the Holy Gifts which were presanctified at the previous Sunday's Liturgy. In addition, the penitential Service of Great Compline is sung, at which, on the first four days of this first week (as well as on Thursday of the Fifth Week) the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete is read. This Canon is a long penitential composition of 250 verses expressing the longings of a guilty and penitent soul.

This week we are also introduced to the moving Lenten prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian, setting forth the essence of spiritual life. This prayer is said at each of the liturgical Services throughout the weekdays of Great Lent and the first half of Passion Week.

The Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian.

O Lord and Master of my life! Take from me the spirit of sloth, despair? lust of power and idle talk.

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to Thy servant,

Yea, O Lord and King! Grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my Brother; for Blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages. Amen.

All of the Sundays of Great Lent (with the exception of Palm Sunday) the usual Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is replaced by the longer Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. This Liturgy is especially characterized by its longer and very moving prayers.

First Sunday of Great Lent Sunday of Orthodoxy.

The First Sunday of Great Lent is dedicated to the final triumph of the Church over the iconoclasts and the restoration of the Holy Icons to the churches, which took place on

the First Sunday of Lent, March 11, 843. Thus it is called the Sunday of Orthodoxy. As the Orthodox triumphed during the iconoclastic controversy because of the dedication of the Martyrs and Confessors who suffered for the Faith, so too, we strive to imitate these Martyrs by our own ascetical self-denial. A special feature of this day is the Office of Orthodoxy, at which a procession with the Holy Icons is made, and sixty anathemas pronounced against various heretics and heresies of the 4th-14th Centuries.

Second Sunday of Great Lent St. Gregory Palamas.

The Second Sunday of Great Lent is dedicated to St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica. St. Gregory's triumph over the heretics of his time is seen as a renewal of the Triumph of Orthodoxy of the previous Sunday. Another theme of this Sunday is that of the Prodigal Son as a model of repentance, for which a special Canon is devoted at this Sunday's Matins.

Third Sunday of Great Lent Veneration of the Cross.

The Third Sunday of Great Lent is dedicated to the Cross and the bringing-out of the Precious Cross, which closely parallels the ceremonies of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross on Sept. 14. At this time we are reminded of the upcoming crucifixion of the Lord and strengthened to persevere in our Lenten struggles.

The Fourth Sunday of Great Lent St. John Climacus.

The Fourth Sunday is dedicated to St. John Climacus (of The Ladder), Abbot of Sinai, who, because of his ascetical writing (The Ladder) serves as a model of a true Christian ascetic. The Ladder is appointed by the Church to be read during Great Lent. In the course of this week (the Fifth Week of Great Lent) the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete is read on Thursday in its entirety, as well as a Canon to St. Mary of Egypt. In addition, St. Mary's Life is read. On Saturday of this week the Akathist Hymn to the Most-Holy Theotokos is sung with everyone standing (Akathistos means not sitting). It reminds us that we are dependent on the protecting intercession of the Holy Theotokos at all moments of crisis and danger.

The Fifth Sunday of Great Lent St. Mary of Egypt.

The Fifth Sunday of Great Lent is dedicated to St. Mary of Egypt. St. Mary was a harlot living in the Egyptian city of Alexandria who later repented and lived the rest of her life in solitude in the Egyptian desert, serving as a model of repentance to all Christians. The end of this week the Sixth marks the end of Great Lent and the beginning of Passion Week.

Passion (Holy) Week.

Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday.

Immediately after the end of the forty days of penitence and before the days of darkness and mourning of Passion Week, the Holy Church celebrates the bright festivals of Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday. Lazarus Saturday commemorates the raising of Lazarus from the dead and serves as a reminder that Jesus is the Master of life and death, and foreshadows the

Lord's glorious Resurrection eight days later. Palm Sunday, of course, commemorates Our Lord's glorious entrance into Jerusalem. On this day Palm branches are blessed and held by the faithful (pussy-willow branches in the Russian Church) in remembrance of that joyous day.

Holy Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.

The next three days (Holy Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday) are characterized by the beautiful and moving melody sung at Matins, Behold, the Bridegroom comes as midnight..., for which reason the Matins of these three days is called Bridegroom Matins. The theme is taken from the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and serves to remind us of the urgency of the End it is near at hand and we must be watchful and repent while there is still time.

Holy Thursday.

On this day we commemorate the washing of the disciple's feet, the institution of the Holy Eucharist (the Last Supper), the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the betrayal of Christ by Judas. In certain cathedrals and monasteries a special Service is celebrated in which the Bishop (or Abbot), taking the place of Christ, washes the feet of twelve Priests, representing the Twelve Apostles. In addition, the Holy Chrism is consecrated on this day by the various Patriarchates and Autocephalous Churches.

Holy Friday.

On this day we commemorate Christ's suffering and death. The Matins Service is characterized by the reading of the Twelve Passion Gospels which relate events connected with the final hours from the Last Supper to the Lord's Crucifixion, Death and Burial. That morning the more solemn Royal Hours are said, and at the Vespers Service sung that afternoon, the Burial Shroud (Russian Plaschanitsa; Greek Epitaphion) is brought out in a solemn procession and placed in a specially-prepared place (the Grave) for veneration. On this day neither the full Liturgy (except if the Feast of the Annunciation falls on this day) nor that of the Presanctified Gifts is celebrated.

Holy Saturday.

On this day we commemorate the burial of Christ and His descent into Hell. At the Matins Lamentations Service the Praises are sung before the Burial Shroud in the center of the church and culminates in a solemn procession with the Holy Shroud around the church. On Holy Saturday (according to the Typikon, at 4:00 p.m.), the Vespers with the Liturgy of St. Basil is celebrated with the reading of fifteen Old Testament lessons which refer to Passover, the Resurrection and Baptism. At this time the liturgical vestments and furnishings are changed to white. [Here we must remember that in the ancient Church the Catechumens were baptized on this day, which accounts for the singing of As many as have been baptized into Christ... instead of the Trisagion at the Liturgy, and the changing of the liturgical colors to white the Baptismal colors.]

At the conclusion of the Service (which in ancient times ended about 8:00 p.m.) the Faithful assemble in the now-darkened church for the reading of the Acts of the Apostles. Shortly before Midnight, the Resurrection Nocturns is sung and all of the lights are extinguished. The faithful wait in silence for the moment when the Priest will come out of the Altar with a lit candle, symbolizing the Light of the Risen Christ and the beginning of the Holy Pascha of the Lord the Feasts of Feasts.

Holy Pascha.

At the stroke of Midnight, the clergy come out of the Holy Altar, all of the candles are lit, and a joyous, festive procession circles the church three times with the singing of the hymn: Thy Resurrection, O Christ our Savior, the angels in heaven sing. Enable us on earth to glorify Thee in purity of heart. Stopping before the closed outer doors of the church, the Priest exclaims the Paschal verses, Let God arise..., while the Faithful sing the triumphant Paschal hymn, Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

The Clergy and Faithful now re-enter the church and the singing of the Paschal Canon, This is the Day of Resurrection..., with numerous repetitions of the Paschal hymn, Christ is risen..., begins. At many points during the Service the Clergy exclaim, Christ is risen! and the Faithful respond, Indeed, He is risen! The church is filled with the Faithful holding lit candles and the Clergy in bright vestments. At the conclusion of the Matins, the catechetical address of St. John Chrysostom is read, summoning all, even those who have come only at the eleventh hour, to the great Paschal Banquet. Matins is then followed by the Paschal Liturgy.

The Catechetical Sermon of St. John Chrysostom.

[The Catechetical Sermon of St. John Chrysostom is read by the Celebrant at the end of the Pascha Matins. No one sits during the reading, but all stand and listen with reverence.]

If any man be devout and loves God, let him enjoy this fair and radiant triumphal Feast. If any man be a wise servant, let him, with, rejoicing, enter into the joy of his Lord. If any have labored long in fasting, let him now receive his recompense. If any have wrought from the first hour, let him today receive his just reward. If any have come at the third hour, let him with thankfulness keep the Feast. If any have arrived at the sixth hour, let him have no misgivings; because he shall in no way be deprived thereof. If any have delayed until the ninth hour, let him draw near, fearing nothing. If any have tarried even until the eleventh hour, let him, a(so, be not alarmed at his tardiness; for the Lord, Who is jealous of His honor, will accept the Cost even as the first; He gives rest to him who comes at the eleventh hour, even as to him. who has wrought from the first hour. And he shows mercy upon the last, and cares for the first, and to the one He gives, and upon the other He Bestows gifts. And He both accepts the deeds, and welcomes the intention, and honors the acts and praises the offering.

Wherefore, enter all of you into the joy of your Lord, and receive your reward, both, the first, and likewise the second. You rich and poor together, hold high festival. You sober and you heedless, honor the day. Rejoice today, both, you who have fasted and you who have disregarded the Fast. The table is fully-laden) all of you feast sumptuously. The calf is fatted; let no one go hungry away. Enjoy all of you the Feast of faith: Receive all the riches of Coving-fondness. Let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shone forth from the grave.

Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free. He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it. By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive. He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh. And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry: Hell, said he, was embittered, when it encountered Thee in the lower regions. It was embittered, for it was abolished. It was embittered, for it was mocked. It was embittered, for it was slain, It was embittered, for it was overthrown. It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains. It took a body, and met God face to face. It took earth and encountered Heaven. It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen.

O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. To Him be glory and dominion unto ages of ages. Amen.

At the conclusion of the Liturgy, a special bread, called the Artos, is placed before the opened Holy Doors and the clergy and faithful proceed to the Blessing of the Paschal Baskets in which the faithful have placed specially prepared foods from which they had abstained during the Great Lent. A special item among these foods is the decorated Pascha bread (in Russian Kulich), as well as specially-prepared cheese and egg dishes. Thus we celebrate the Glorious Resurrection of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Artos.

In the Orthodox Church it is the custom for a single loaf of blessed bread (Greek Artos) to lie before the Iconostasis throughout Bright Week in memory of the Risen Christ, before it is shared out among the whole congregation. Depicted on the top of the Artos are either the symbol of Christ's victory over death the Cross, surmounted by a crown of thorns, or the Resurrection of Christ. On the first day of Pascha, during the Liturgy, after the Prayer Before the Ambo, the Artos is blessed by a special prayer and sprinkling with Holy Water. Throughout Bright Week, at the end of the Liturgy, the Artos is carried around the church in solemn procession. On the Saturday of Bright Week it is distributed as a blessing of the Archpastor to the congregation (sometimes after Sunday Liturgy on St. Thomas Sunday).

The significance of the Artos is that it serves to remind all Christians of the events connected with the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. While still living on earth, the Lord called Himself the Bread of Life, saying: *I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and He who believes in Me shall never thirst* (John 6:35). After His Resurrection, more than once Jesus appeared to His disciples, ate before them and blessed their own food. For example, as evening fell on the first day of His Resurrection, He was recognized in Emmaus by two of His disciples as He blessed and broke bread (Luke 24:13-35).

On the 40th day after His Resurrection, the Lord ascended into heaven, and His disciples and followers found comfort in their memories of the Lord: they recalled His every word, His every step and His every action. When they met for common prayer, they would partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, remembering the Last Supper. When they sat down to an ordinary meal, they would leave a place at the head of the table empty for the invisibly present Lord and would lay bread on that place.

Remembering this custom of the Apostles', the Fathers of the Church made it their custom to put out the Artos at the Paschal Feast in memory of the appearances of the Risen Lord to His disciples, and also in memory of the fact that the Lord Who suffered and was resurrected for our justification has made Himself the true Bread of Life and is invisibly present in His church always, to the close of the age (Matt. 28:20).

Whereas special Paschal breads, called kulichi are broken and eaten on the first day of Pascha, the Artos is kept whole throughout the whole of Bright Week as a reminder of the presence of the Risen Savior in the midst of those who believe in Him and is only divided and distributed on Saturday. In this way Bright Week begins and ends with the eating of especially baked and blessed bread.

The Artos may also be compared to the unleavened bread of the Old Testament, of which ancient Israel, delivered from their captivity in the land of Egypt, ate during the week of the Passover (Ex. 12:15-20). As Cyril, Bishop of Turov, who lived during the 12th Century in Russia, said in a sermon for the Sunday after Pascha: Even as the Jews bore the unleavened bread upon their heads out of Egypt through the desert (Ex. 12:34) until they had crossed the Red Sea, after which they dedicated the bread to God, divided it amongst all their host, and having all eaten thereof, became...terrible to their enemies, even so do we, saved by our Resurrected Lord from the captivity of that Pharaoh of the mind, the Devil, bear forth the blessed bread the Artos from the day of the Resurrection of Christ and, finally, having dedicated this bread to God, we eat of it and preserve it to the health of body and soul.

It is a custom among Russian Orthodox Christians to this day to keep the Artos throughout the year and with due reverence and faith to eat of it in time of illness or distress. This is eaten, often together with a drink of Holy Water, which had been blessed at the Feast of the Theophany of Our Lord.

Bright Week.

On the afternoon of Paschal Sunday, a special Paschal Vespers is served, characterized by the singing of the Great Prokeimenon. All of the services of this Bright Week are characterized by the joyous Paschal Hymns which had been sung on Pascha itself and the constant, Christ is risen from the dead.... All of the Faithful, when encountering each other at home, at work, in church, etc., greet each other with the Paschal Greeting and Response, Christ is Risen! Indeed, He is risen! and the threefold Kiss of Peace. During the course of this week all the doors of the Iconostasis remain open, symbolizing our free access to the Holy of Holies that our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, opened to us by His Blood. The Burial Shroud remains on the Holy Table and the Liturgies are celebrated upon it. No fasting is permitted during this week and no kneeling until the Vespers of Holy Pentecost, fifty days hence.

Paschal Hymn to the Theotokos.

[Sung after the 8th Ode of the Paschal Canon.]

The Angel cried to the Lady Full of Grace:
Rejoice, O Pure Virgin!
Again I say: Rejoice!

Your Son is risen from His three days in the tomb.
With Himself He has raised all the dead.
Rejoice, all ye people!
Shine, shine, O New Jerusalem,
The glory of the Lord has shone on you.
Exult now and be glad, O Zion,
Be radiant, O Pure Theotokos,
In the Resurrection of your Son!

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