

How the Byzantine Churches (Catholic and Orthodox) Prepare for a Spiritually Fruitful Lent and the Resurrection of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ ICXC

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This is a condensation of an original March, 2007 program on Immaculate Heart Radio's Bishop's Hour Hosted by Bob Dunning. This program was developed and given by Fr. Theodore Wroblicky, a Ukrainian Greek Catholic Priest who serves Holy Wisdom Parish in the Greater Sacramento area.

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In the spirit of *Oriental Lumen* (Light of the East), the Apostolic Letter of John Paul II, I would like to share with you how Eastern Catholics who use the Byzantine rite prepare themselves for the Great Fast – or Lent as the Roman Catholic Church calls it. In a nutshell, this is how the Byzantine churches teach us to prepare for our Lenten period prior to the Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord. God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Why do we call it the Great Lent or the Great Fast? Because it is the most important of the Byzantine Churches' four annual Lenten periods, and because it focuses on the individuals' metanoia, their repentance and return to God. Their spiritual warfare to recapture the Robe of Incorruptibility that he or she received in Baptism. The other three Lenten periods each year are listed below:

The Apostles Fast. From the Sunday after Pentecost to the Feast of Sts. Peter & Paul. June 29

The Dormition Fast. From August 1 to the Dormition Feast August 15, our name for the Assumption of the Mother of God

St. Philip's Fast. From the Feast of St. Philip on November 14 until Christmas Eve

This article will not address these three just mentioned Lenten periods. We will discuss the "Preparation" period before The Great Lent, our Journey to Easter or Pascha because this is the most important of the Lenten periods in the Church and the only Lenten period with a four-week liturgical preparation period. This preparation begins on the Sunday of Zacchaeus, which in 2010 is Sunday, January 17, 2010. Some have said this preparation for Lent is unique to the Byzantine Churches. We call the Lenten period a Journey because the road to Easter – Lent – can be a strenuous spiritual road to travel. As with any journey, one must know where he is going and prepare for it. Ever go on a camping trip and forget to take a frying pan or a current roadmap? You know better, so you take the time to prepare for the Journey.

The 40 day Great Fast of Lent is a long journey on a road filled with potholes from the Evil One. It begins on the Monday of the week in which Ash Wednesday falls and ends at Lazarus Saturday, which celebrates the resurrection of Lazarus on the Saturday before Palm Sunday. The week from Palm Sunday to Easter, which the Latin Church

refers to as Holy Week, is not part of the Great Fast or Lent in the Byzantine Churches. This week bears the ancient name of Passion Week among the Byzantines. It is during this period called Passion Week that Byzantine Christians focus their prayer on the events of the Mystical Supper, and the suffering, crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ.

To better understand the preparation period for Great Lent, it is necessary to understand that the Byzantine Churches, Catholic and Orthodox, consider the purpose of the Great Fast to be the development in the person, of a change-of-heart. This change-of-heart in the person is to cause the person to turn closer to God and away from the ways or the cares of the world. As we all know, our daily lives can consume a person's every waking moment. We need to take a break and re-focus on God. Metanoia is the Greek word that we use to describe this attitudinal change. It means to REPENT. Repentance means for us to return to God and away from the cares of the world – away from sinful alienation from God. It is an individual's return from his exile from God which has been caused by over indulgence in the ways of the world. Some say it is similar to a climatic change or a philosophical change that will capture the lives and hearts of the penitents for the seven weeks to Easter. Its intent is to develop, in the penitent, a hunger for God that will drive the person closer to God.

This will not be easy. In fact, it can be quite difficult. So, the Church invites us to participate in a 4-week preparation period to help us achieve the "attitude" we must have in our hearts in order to have a successful Great Fast and to return to God the Father. It is a liturgy-based preparation on each of the five Sundays before the Great Lent in which the scripture readings have been specially selected to encourage developing the Lenten attitude which will produce the change-of-heart or metanoia necessary to return to God. They are the lessons sung in the hymns (proprs) and the Gospel lesson of that particular Sunday.:

Zacchaeus Sunday
(Luke 19: 1-10)

The Publican and the Pharisee
(Luke 18: 10-14)

The Prodigal Son
(Luke 15: 11-32)

Sunday of Meatfare (Last Judgment)
(Matthew (25: 31-46)

Forgiveness Sunday
(Matthew (6: 14-21)

First, in order to return to God during Lent, or any other time for that matter, we must want to do it! We must desire it and make the EXTRA EFFORT to accomplish it! We must have the desire equal to Zacchaeus to get to know Christ our God !

Secondly, we must become as the Publican, and recognize that we are sinners, and humble ourselves to ask forgiveness. We must not be, nor become, like the boastful Pharisee. For he that exalts himself will be humbled; and he who humbles himself will be exalted by the Lord.

Thirdly, we have the lesson of the Prodigal Son and his return from the exile of sin. What a beautiful lesson to teach us the wonderful welcome our Father in heaven will give us, **only if we take the steps to return to Him**

Fourth, Meatfare Sunday gives us the lesson of the absolute truth of the Last Judgment.

It is a reminder, that we must put into action Christ's command to love our neighbor.

Lastly, there is Forgiveness Sunday. We are reminded of the necessity to forgive others if we are to be forgiven. **Let me say that again. We must forgive others if we expect to be forgiven by God.**

We will now explore these five lessons in more depth.

The Sunday of Zacchaeus begins our preparation for the Great Fast. The Gospel lesson in the Liturgy of this day is taken from **Saint Luke, Chapter 19, verses 1 through 10.** Jesus was on his way to Jericho where a large crowd was gathered and the Publican Zacchaeus lived in that town. Let me read a portion from the Gospel lesson:

“There was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was very rich. He sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he RAN ahead and CLIMBED UP INTO A SYCAMORE TREE TO SEE HIM! ... and when Jesus came to that place, He looked up and saw him and said to him, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house. So he made haste and came down and received Him (the Lord) joyfully.”

Zacchaeus wanted to know Christ better. But to do that, he first had to overcome his personal problem described in the gospel story – he was a shorty. A little guy. A man of small stature. His physical stature refers to his, baggage, his past transgressions, his sins, that prevented him from knowing Christ. He had to make an extra effort to get to know the Lord better

So what did he do? He climbed up a tree. Put another way, he overcame the weight of his baggage. Being a shorty no longer affected him as he could now see the Lord.

Zacchaeus' message is to do something about the desire to see and know the Lord. His desire to know the Lord compelled him to make the extra effort – to do something about it. And he did. And he was rewarded because Christ understood his invitation and went to his house for dinner.

What extra effort are we going to make this Lent to get to know the Lord better?

Zacchaeus then is urging each of us to build the desire within us to better know Christ and the Father. What can we do. First of all, we must want to do it. We must Desire to Know Him better. Otherwise it will never get off the ground. Once we have successfully dealt with that, we have to act upon it – we must do something about it.

We are all short little Zacchaeuses with our own personal limitations. Our personal spiritual baggage. We should strive to recognize this and then do something to bring us closer to our Lord God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Zacchaeus was a Chief Tax Collector – a Publican. Tax Collectors were not well liked by the people. Some would say that attitude carries forth to our present time. The Church in its wisdom knows that she must teach us to LOVE our neighbors – even the short, little, despised tax collectors. She skillfully begins Her lesson on love, which is still weeks off in this preparatory cycle, by picking a despicable person to honor at the onset of the cycle.

Speaking of Publicans, Tax Collectors and other people that people love to hate but must love, we come to the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee. **LUKE 18: 10-14**

The lesson of this Sunday is the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. The Pharisee went up to the temple in his vainglory and the publican bowed in his repentance. Both stood before the master of all. One of them lost his reward because of his boasting, while the other, won God's blessing through his sighs. False pride, more often than not, is the cause of our sinfulness. The opposite of false pride is Christian Humility. We must become as the publican, in this Gospel lesson, and recognize that we are sinners, and humble ourselves. We must not be, nor become, like the boastful Pharisee. For he that exalts himself will be humbled; and he who humbles himself will be exalted by the Lord. Are we filled with so much ego, and so much pride to not be able to humble ourselves before our God and ask his forgiveness. Can we ask for forgiveness?

Another good example follows on the next Sunday – the Sunday of the Prodigal Son. **Luke 15:11-32**. You know the story the prodigal son asks and receives from his father his inheritance. He squanders it on loose living far from home. He, in effect, has exiled himself from his inheritance and he has lost it. As can be the case, he falls on hard times – He sins grievously against his Father – who in this story is prefigured as God the Father. He comes to his senses – has his change of heart – **his metanoia**. He repents and returns to his Father who welcomes him with open arms, dresses him in finery (symbolic of the Robe of Incorruptibility he lost in his prodigal living) and joyfully prepares a fine banquet party for him. Prodigal living (sinful living) caused him to distance himself from the Father – he was lost, dead, and now he is found – **he lives!**

We are all prodigal sons and daughters when we stray away from God's love, His teachings, and His influence on our lives. Like the Prodigal Son we must act to make that change – that metanoia – have that change of heart – that attitude adjustment. We, each one of us, must do something about it. We must act!!!

What a beautiful lesson to teach us the wonderful welcome our Father in heaven will give us, only if we take the steps to return to Him. But we must take those steps if we are to achieve the goal of returning to God.

Our fourth preparatory lesson for Great Lent comes on Meatfare Sunday, when the teaching to love and care for our neighbor comes to its culmination. **Matthew 25:31-46** On this day, the Byzantine Church provides us with the forceful story of the Last Judgment when Christ will divide the sheep from the goats. In so doing the righteous are represented by the sheep on the right of Christ and the goats are the sinful on the left who did not show compassion and love to their sisters and brothers who were in need. All that we have on earth in this life, is a gift from God and we must share God's gifts with our lesser brothers and sisters who are in need. We must show our love for our neighbor and assist him when he is in need. To fail to love puts us at risk of being separated on the left along with the goats.

The last Sunday lesson of our Lenten preparatory cycle is called Forgiveness Sunday. The **gospel of Matthew 6:14-21** on this day begins powerfully with the phrase "...if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." **How much clearer can it be said!** Now why must we forgive others? Well, how are you

supposed to love them if you hold something, a grudge or whatever, against them. You can't! But, we must love them! We can hate the sin, but we must love the sinner.

On this evening, at Vespers, we, clergy and lay people alike, approach each other and ask each other to be forgiven and each person forgives each other person. What a beautiful way to begin the Great Fast knowing that you are forgiven by those close to you and that you have forgiven them in turn, their trespasses against you.

OK, What have we talked about?

To summarize, Byzantine Christians – Catholic and Orthodox – Believe to have a spiritually worthwhile Great Lent, they must undergo a change-in-heart – a metanoia to turn from their cares of the world and back to God. This is an attitudinal change, which is fueled by the desire to know Christ-God better. To do this the penitent must have the humility of the publican to be able to ask God for forgiveness. Given the desire to return to God and the humility to ask forgiveness, the penitent must become like the Prodigal Son and do something about it – **Return To The Father!** Once he has returned, he contemplates the finality of the Last Judgment which leads him to ask for forgiveness. But, before he can ask God to forgive himself, he must forgive others who have transgressed him. Forgiving others and receiving forgiveness from his neighbor is the first act he makes as the Great Lent begins.

The Great Fast, the period of our return to the Father – our period of metanoia – is now beginning! Let us now pray the prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian which is prayed at each service in the Great Lent:

O Lord and Master of my life, drive from me the spirit of indifference, despair, lust for power, and idle chatter.

PROSTRATION

Instead, bestow on me, your servant, the spirit of integrity, humility, patience and love.

PROSTRATION

Yes O Lord and King, let me see my own sins and not judge my brothers and sisters; for You are blessed for ever and ever. Amen.

PROSTRATION

Glory to Jesus Christ !

Please pray for me a sinner. I promise to pray for all of you that your Lent will be spiritually fruitful for you. God Bless !