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St. Parthenios of Lampsakos

To the Clergy and Faithful of the
Diocese of Etna and Portland

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Εὐλογεῖτε and Εὐλογία Κυρίου. Asking for your blessings and prayers, I offer my humble blessing to all of you at this important time, when we anticipate the formal beginning of the Great Fast and begin the road towards the Feast of Feasts, the Passover of our Lord, Pascha.

I would like to make some brief remarks about the Great Fast (or Great Lent), asking that you accept them, until my enthronement as your Bishop on the Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearing Women, as the personal remarks of your future servant. As you all know, on Clean Monday (Καθαρά Δευτέρα), the first day of fasting for Great Lent, we abstain from all food; i.e., this day is one of total abstinence. I would urge all who can do so to observe this custom, since, while difficult, it serves to teach us about the sway that our desires have over us. Some Christians maintain a fast through Wednesday, as do most monastic communities (and some even longer!). Keep these individuals in mind, since they will serve to temper the natural reaction that the body and our fallen passions have against deprivation for the sake of developing our spiritual sensitivities. For those who are ill and cannot fast an entire day, restrict your eating as much as possible, concentrating on prayer and inner reflection.

As you know, various great Fathers of the Church (St. John Chrysostomos is frequently cited in this context) warn us that fasting is hypocritical and meaningless if, as we avoid eating, we use our mouths and tongues to denigrate and criticize our fellow man (something that far too many Orthodox Christians have made a part of their spiritual lives, as though it were not absolutely contrary to Christianity). This is an essential point, though just as essential as another point; i.e., that we must not double our hypocrisy by using this caveat as an excuse not to fast! Moreover, we should take no pride in fasting. In Paradise—and we fast in order to imitate the life in Paradise, where, as St. Dorotheos of Gaza tells us, man's nourishment was spiritual—where humans were gentle and meek, loving and forgiving, and self-effacing creatures constantly glorifying their Creator, pride was unknown. Men and women in Paradise were not possessed of pride in their uprightness. They were not the spiritually proud, backbiting, gossiping, arrogant, and egotistical creatures that we are today. In obedience, they found complete joy, as should we in following the Holy Fast, leading to our regeneration and deification by Grace in the Resurrection of Christ.

Fasting, above all, is a regimen that restores our spiritual health. It is not “giving up something,” but it is a way of gaining back the image of God within us through obedience to the rules of that regimen. It is not something dark and negative. It is light and renewing. It is meant to restore us in soul and in body. Just as so-called “Passion Week,” a very Westernized idea, during the last week of Great Lent (properly called “Great and Holy Week”) tells us of Divine sacrifice and suffering that are constantly brightened by the Light of the coming Resurrection, so the sometimes arduous discipline of the Great

Lent must be constantly viewed through the prism of our spiritual (and, indeed, physical) renewal, which is brought about by our engagement with spiritual contemplation. We thereby quell the stormy state of the outer self, anchored as it is in sin, the ego, selfishness, nastiness, pride, and an abhorrent disdain for others. This dislike rises, above all, from our alienation, inwardly, from God and our inner selves, which we should seek to perfect in Christ by the disciplines and Mysteries of the Church.

Thus, in monasteries, I might note, the Presanctified Liturgy, contrary to the wrong teaching that such is disallowed in the Church, is celebrated daily on weekdays, nourishing the soul on the Mystery of Divine Communion. This can serve as a standard for the Faithful, who should avail themselves frequently of the Mysteries during Great Lent (after proper preparation, of course). And as purity of body dominates the whole of the life of the monastic, so married couples, in imitation of this fact, should abide by the spirit of the Great Lent and restrict marital relations. This is not because the married life is sinful or impure, since it is blessed by the Mystery of Marriage, but because the monastic life of celibacy and virginity, which reflects the true and *natural* physical state of the human (virginity), is also a standard to which married couples should eventually aim, the perversion of modern society's vision of human relations notwithstanding.

With these few humble words, I wish all of you a Καλή Τεσσαρακοστή (a “Good Lent”), or a *Post Uşor* (an “Easy Fast”), as our Romanian Orthodox brethren so beautifully say. Soliciting your prayers and goodwill through the intercessions of the Holy *Theotokos*,

Least Among Monks,
† Bishop Auxentios

Hierarch-Elect of the Diocese
of Etna and Portland