

Prot. No. 94

CATECHETICAL HOMILY
For Holy and Great Lent

+ B A R T H O L O M E W

By God's Grace Archbishop of Constantinople,
New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Plenitude of the Church,
Grace and Peace from our Savior Jesus Christ
And Prayers, Blessings and Forgiveness from Us

“Come, all peoples, let us today welcome
The gift of fasting
The period of repentance granted to us by God”
(Monday, First Week of Fasting)

Brethren and beloved children in the Lord,

The fast proposed to us by our Holy Church is not any deprivation, but a charisma. And the repentance to which it calls us is not any punishment, but a divine gift.

When the Church urges us, through the words of Scripture, not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth “where most and rust consume” but instead to store up treasures in heaven, where there is no danger of corruption, it is telling us the truth. For the Church is not of this world, even though it lives in this world and knows it. It knows humanity: our real need and distress. It knows our time well: the time of great development and speed, the plethora of information and confusion, the time of many fears, threats and collapses.

This is why – with calmness and steadiness – the Church invites everyone to repentance. This is why it discourages its children from taking the wrong path by treasuring their labors and basing their hopes on unstable foundations. Rather, it encourages them to store up treasure in heaven; for where our treasure lies, there also our heart is.

The treasure that cannot be corrupted and the hope that does not shame is precisely God's love, the divine force that binds all things together. It is the incarnate Word of God, who stays with us forever.

He is the sanctification of our souls and bodies. For, He did not come to judge but to save the world. He did not come to criticize but to heal. "He wounds with compassion and demonstrates compassion with fervor."

He abolished the one who held the power of death, namely the devil. He annihilated the sorrow of death, namely the joyless form and dark presence of death, which darkens and poisons all of our life and joy.

This is why, when our heart and love are directed toward the divine-human Lord, who has authority over the living and the dead, then everything is illumined and transformed.

Indeed, when the Apostle exhorts us "not to set our hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Tim. 6.17), he is assuring us that the true enjoyment of life is exactly what God offers us, while we simply receive it with gratitude and thanksgiving. Then, the little becomes abundant, because it is blessed; and the fleeting and momentary shine with the light of eternity.

Then, not only do the joys of life contain something eternal; but the troubles and sufferings become occasions of divine comfort.

The divine economy of salvation is certain. For, God is "the one who provides everything with depth of wisdom and loving-kindness." And the deposit of our labors is secure, for "we surrender all of our life and hope" to the incarnate Word.

So when the Gospel refers us to heaven, it is speaking literally. It brings us down to the reality of the earth, which has become heaven.

This is the certainty experienced and confessed by the Church.

"Through your Cross, O Christ, there is one flock and one church of angels and human beings. Heaven and earth rejoice together. Lord, glory to you."

The Church grants us the opportunity to experience this miracle of earth-become-heaven. Our roots lie in heaven. Without the Church, we are uprooted and homeless.

For the Church is our home. So long as we return to the Church, we are returning home; we come to ourselves. So long as we are estranged from the Church, we are lost and meaningless.

So long as we approach the Church, we perceive the authenticity of what is true. We behold the heavenly Father awaiting us outside the house.

We are convinced by the sense of goodness and beauty; we sense the presence of God's powerful love, which overcomes death; we no longer sense the corruption and doubt, which mock the world.

Therefore, let us heed the divine invitation to enter the ocean of fasting in order to reach the harbor of light and resurrection with all the saints.

Holy and Great Lent 2009

Your fervent supplicant before God,

+BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople