
THE TORCHBEARER

Great Lent, 2008

Forgiveness Sunday

by Father Alexander Schmemmann

In the Orthodox Church, the last Sunday before Great Lent – the day on which, at Vespers, Lent is liturgically announced and inaugurated – is called Forgiveness Sunday. On the morning of that Sunday, at the Divine Liturgy, we hear the words of Christ:

"If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses..." (Mark 6:14-15)

Then after Vespers – after hearing the announcement of Lent in the Great Prokeimenon: "Turn not away Thy face from Thy child for I am afflicted! Hear me speedily! Draw near unto my soul and deliver it!", after making our entrance into Lenten worship, with its special memories, with the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian, with its prostrations – we ask forgiveness from each other, we perform the rite of forgiveness and reconciliation. And as we approach each other with words of reconciliation, the choir intones the Paschal hymns, filling the church with the anticipation of Paschal joy.

What is the meaning of this rite? Why is it that the Church wants us to begin Lenten season with forgiveness and reconciliation? These questions are in order because for too many people Lent means primarily, and almost exclusively, a change of diet, the compliance with ecclesiastical regulations concerning fasting. They understand fasting as an end in itself, as a "good deed" required by God and carrying in itself its merit and its reward. But, the Church spares no effort in revealing to us that fasting is but a means, one among many, towards a higher goal: the spiritual renewal of man, his return to God, true repentance and, therefore, true reconciliation. The Church spares no effort in warning us against a hypocritical and pharisaic fasting, against the reduction of religion to mere external obligations. As a Lenten hymn says: *In vain do you rejoice in no eating, O soul! For you abstain from food, but from passions you are not purified. If you persevere in sin, you will perform a useless fast.*

Now, forgiveness stands at the very center of Christian faith and of Christian life because Christianity itself is, above all, the religion of forgiveness. God forgives us, and His forgiveness is in Christ, His Son, Whom He sends to us, so that by sharing in His humanity we may share in His love and be truly reconciled with God. Indeed, Christianity has no other content but love. And it is primarily the renewal of that love, a return to it, a growth in it, that we seek in Great Lent, in fasting and prayer, in the entire spirit and the entire effort of that season. Thus, truly forgiveness is both the beginning of, and the proper condition for the Lenten season.

One may ask, however: Why should I perform this rite when I have no "enemies"? Why should I ask forgiveness from people who have done nothing to me, and whom I hardly know? To ask these questions, is to misunderstand the Orthodox teaching concerning forgiveness. It is true, that open enmity, personal hatred, real animosity may be absent from our life, though if we experience them, it may be easier for us to repent, for these feelings openly contradict Divine commandments. But, the Church reveals to us that there are much subtler ways of offending Divine Love. These are indifference, selfishness, lack of interest in other people, of any real concern for them -- in short, that wall which we usually erect around ourselves, thinking that by being "polite" and "friendly" we fulfill God's commandments. The rite of forgiveness is so important precisely because it makes us realize -- be it only for one minute -- that our entire relationship to other men is wrong, makes us experience that encounter of one child of God with another, of one person created by God with another, makes us feel that mutual "recognition" which is so terribly lacking in our cold and dehumanized world.

On that unique evening, listening to the joyful Paschal hymns we are called to make a spiritual discovery: to taste of another mode of life and relationship with people, of life whose essence is love. We can discover that always and everywhere Christ, the Divine Love Himself, stands in the midst of us, transforming our mutual alienation into brotherhood. As I advance towards the other, as the other comes to me -- we begin to realize that it is Christ Who brings us together by His love for both of us.

And because we make this discovery -- and because this discovery is that of the Kingdom of God itself: the Kingdom of Peace and Love, of reconciliation with God and, in Him, with all that exists -- we hear the hymns of that Feast, which once a year, "opens to us the doors of Paradise." We know why we shall fast and pray, what we shall seek during the long Lenten pilgrimage. Forgiveness Sunday: the day on which we acquire the power to make our fasting -- true fasting; our effort -- true effort; our reconciliation with God -- true reconciliation.

Church Records...

"As many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ"

- Dr. Jeffrey Ristaino of Boxboro was chrismated on December 23rd.
- Brianna Elizabeth, daughter of Timothy and Nadine (Beshere) Adams of Canton, was baptized on January 27th.

Many Years!



“Blessed are they whom thou has chosen and taken O Lord!”

+Demitry G. Taksery (82) of Westwood fell asleep in the Lord on December 24th. His wife, son and 3 daughters, along with their families, survive him. Burial was at Fairview Cemetery in Hyde Park.

+Lillian Khouri (86) of Wellesley fell asleep in the Lord on January 26th. Two sons and two daughters, along with their families survive her. Burial was at Fairview Cemetery in Hyde Park.

Memory Eternal!



From the Executive Board... This Lenten Season let's concentrate on building our Spiritual Wealth. Take a moment from your busy day and reflect on how you can make a difference.

Perform a random act of kindness; help someone in need; visit someone who is lonely; feed someone who is hungry. The smallest act can ignite a feeling of warmth and joy for the recipient, that will come back to you many fold. Don't think about it, just do it. There is no better way to thank God for sending Christ to die for our sins. Happy Easter.....Christ has Risen! Truly he has Risen! Respectfully, *Wayne E. Zahka, Chairman*

From the VMS... The VMS will be having a food sale of small trays of Kibbe and filo dough meat fingers. The last day for orders will be March 28th, 2008 with pick up on April 13th, 2008. Please watch the weekly bulletin for further details.

From the Stewardship Committee... What does it mean to be a steward of God? Each and every one of us is a Steward and is called upon to use the special gifts God has bestowed upon us to do his work. You may be asking yourself what do I have to give to God, what are my gifts? These are your talents, your time and your treasures. Each of us has unique gifts that we may take for granted, but are truly a blessing given to us by God. As a steward you should give back these gifts by sharing and supporting your church.

By launching our Stewardship program last year we were able to increase our revenue to the church by 21.6 % over the previous dues system. Thanks to all of you for searching your hearts and giving what you know you can afford, you've all made this an outstanding first year. Our Finance Committee has set a new goal for 2008 and has asked that we increase our total revenue by 7% from 2007. This can easily be accomplished if all of our parishioners participated in our stewardship program. We need 100% parishioner participation please help us reach this goal.

Please, if you haven't sent in your pledge form for 2008 please do so immediately. Thanks to our talented web master John Haddad, we now have a Stewardship web site that you can visit and download pledge forms and talent sheets. It is filled with useful information please visit us today at www.stjohnd.org/stewardship

I am also very pleased to announce that we have new members to our Stewardship Committee they have joined us to help spread the good word. They are: Donna Boyle, Valerie Chobanian, Cameron Close, Susan Doyle, John Haddad, Gloria Kerzarian, Bobby Kurker, George Matthews, Elaine Sabbag, James Sabbag, Leo Saidnawey and Jean Teebagy. If you would like to join or have any questions regarding stewardship please feel free to ask anyone of them also Liz MacNeil , Chris Bezreh or myself Debbie Greenstein.

We pray as a parish, that we will continue on this path of feel good giving, and will be blessed with much abundance from God above. *Debbie Greenstein & the Stewardship Committee*

From the Order... The Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch for the Diocese of Worcester and New England enjoyed its annual Christmas Party in December at St. John of Damascus Church. A buffet was served and the concert by the Noble and Greenough Blues Band was most entertaining. Bob Bunai was feted on the occasion that day of his 95th birthday. Through the generosity of members of The Order, a total of \$1800 was raised for the Al-Kafaat Foundation in Lebanon. The next meeting of The Order of St. Ignatius will take place at the Parish Life Conference in Providence, Rhode Island in June. Check your mail for further details.

The St. John chapter would like to invite you to participate in a fundraiser which will support our sponsorship of 10 year old Tony Srour of Lebanon. During Lent, members will collect donations for our annual Pascha greeting card. This will be an opportunity for you to share Easter greetings with friends and family, as well as support the Children's Relief Fund. We truly appreciate your support.

Lastly, we were deeply saddened by the death of Lillian Khouri of our parish. Lillian and her late husband, Antoon, were among the earliest members and most enthusiastic supporters of The Order. May her memory be eternal! *Christine Bezreh, Chair*

From the Parent Guild... The Parent Guild hosted the Annual Godparents luncheon in January, thanks to the wonderful culinary abilities of Elaine Sabbag and to Elaine's many kitchen helpers. We are gearing up for the Annual Penny Sale scheduled to take place on Sunday, March 9th, following church school dismissal. Loretta Borghi is once again chairing the Penny Sale, so if you would like to help, please contact Loretta. Also, during Lent, the Parent Guild will be hosting the breakfasts following Lazarus Saturday and Holy Thursday morning services. At this time, we are trying to find an available Friday or Saturday evening towards the end of February to get together for a "Family Night." Please watch the Sunday bulletin for information once we are able to schedule that evening.

If you are interested in finding out how you may become involved with the Guild, please see or contact either of us. While the proceeds of our events are to support the Church School, all of our events are also a great way to promote fellowship amongst

parishioners. We hope to see you at the next Family Night and at the Penny Sale! *Yours in Christ, Carol Hazerjian and Bertina Kurker*

Lenten Liturgical Notes & Announcements...

- **Confession** - Great Lent, which begins on March 10th, is the perfect opportunity for you to receive Confession, especially if you plan on receiving the Eucharist on Palm Sunday (April 20th) and Pascha (April 27th). Confession is available *before* all Lenten services, during Matins on Sunday mornings (8:40 – 9:40 am) or by appointment. Please don't wait until the last minute to come to confession. In addition, because of the many extra responsibilities Fr. John will have during Holy Week, he **WILL NOT** be able to hear confessions on Palm Sunday morning or from Holy Wednesday on (i.e. Holy Tuesday is the last chance for confession for Pascha). So please plan accordingly!
- **Lenten services** - During Great Lent, the Church calls us to increase and intensify our prayer life. Keeping this in mind, please note that we will celebrate the Presanctified Liturgy on *Wednesday evenings* during Great Lent at 5:30 p.m. If you wish to receive the Eucharist that evening please fast (from food, drink, and smoking) from noon. In addition, on the first 5 *Friday evenings* during Great Lent, we will chant the Akathist Hymn to the Virgin Mary at 6:30 p.m.
- **Great Compline** - Please consult the weekly bulletin for the schedule.
- The Robert P. Zahka Memorial Scholarship and The St. John of Damascus Community Scholarship: Scholarship applications are now available from the church office and the St. John website. Applications are due by April 1st, 2008 and scholarships will be awarded at church school graduation on June 8th, 2008. Applicants must be high school seniors planning to attend full time, a fully accredited college, university, or technical school. Applicants must be graduates of St. John of Damascus Church School.
- Make plans now to attend the 70th Annual Parish Life Conference, hosted by St. Mary's of Pawtucket, RI on June 26-29, 2008 at The Marriott in Providence, RI). More details to follow.
- The Cookbook Committee would like to thank everyone who sent recipes for the Centennial Cookbook. We currently have 250 recipes collected, but 500 are needed for a successful edition. Please submit your recipes as soon as possible. We especially need appetizers, side dishes, entrees and Lenten dishes, both Arabic and other ethnicities. All parishioners are encouraged to contribute. Please check the list on the bulletin board for recipes we have already received.

Suggestions for cookbook: One or two of your specialties, not your entire collection. Original or handed down recipes, not photocopies from a cookbook or magazine. We have plenty of dessert recipes. For further information, please contact Debbie Leotsakos, Elaine Sabbag, or Chris Bezreh.



Annual Penny Sale

& Luncheon Sunday, March 9th

Immediately following Church School

Join your family, friends and fellow parishioners for a delicious luncheon, the chance to win great prizes and show your support of our Church School.

Roasted Chicken, Hashwa, Salad & Dessert

\$8/Adult \$4/Children

+ 2 Sheets of Penny Sale Tickets with each meal

Lunch will be served immediately following church school. During this time you can purchase additional Penny Sale tickets, take a look at all of the great prizes on stage and purchase raffle tickets for your chance to win great prizes!!

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Services: Sunday-Matins 9:00 a.m.,
Divine Liturgy 10:00 a.m.

Church Office Hours...

Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

The deadline for the Sunday bulletin is Thursday at 10 a.m.

Please plan accordingly.

DEADLINE for the May/June, 2008 *Torchbearer*
will be April 4th. This will be the final newsletter until September 2008.

Please consult the Weekly Sunday Bulletin for any changes, corrections, etc.