



EPARCHY OF NEWTON
MELKITE GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Pastoral Letter for Great Lent 2012

Enter the Fast with Joy!

The Great Fast or Great Lent is the time of preparation for the feast of Christ's resurrection, the Feast of Pascha. Historically Great Lent was the time of the final stage of catechesis for incorporation into the Church through the Mysteries of Illumination—Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist. Those intending to be members of the Church were instructed for a period of time, sometimes even up to three years. The last forty days of this catechesis led up to the Sunday of Pascha when they were fully received into and made members of the Body of Christ, through Baptism.

Since the resurrection of Christ, the Feast of feasts, was an explosion of joy and life, its preparation time was also considered a time of true joy in anticipation of the new life brought about by our Lenten discipline. Sometimes Christians may think of Lent as a gloomy time to beat ourselves or to suffer for suffering's sake. Rather, the Great Fast is the Lenten springtime the Church gives us when we are asked to come to terms with our baptismal commitment to live the joyful new life of a follower of Jesus Christ. Of course, turning our life over to Christ may involve suffering and pain, especially if we are used to living for ourselves alone. But Christ's good news is joyful, and so, even the temporary pain—the "bright sadness"—that our spiritual combat may cause ultimately gives way to a new life of true and profound joy!

The opening prayers at Sunday Forgiveness Vespers on the eve of Great Lent tell us clearly "*... enter the season of the radiant Fast with joy, giving ourselves to spiritual combat, ... as we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit, may we persevere with love, so as to be worthy to see the solemn passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness to behold His holy resurrection.*"

Prayer, fasting and alms-giving are normal actions of a good Christian. But many get lazy; so the Church asks us to focus on these in a more intense way during Great Lent, in order to recreate good habits once again. "*Let us observe a Fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil, to control the tongue, to forbear from anger, to abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then our fasting is true and pleasing to God*" (Vespers on First Monday of the Fast).

The Great Fast is a time then for us to change our style of life, bringing it more in conformity to Christ's life. Conversion (the Greek word is *metanoia* or even *metany*) is an act of turning,

retracing our steps and coming back to godly ways. We recognize our shortcomings and we repent with every metany or bow that we make; we stand upright and the Lord's embrace is open wide.

Take hold of the many opportunities offered by the Church during Great Lent. First and foremost are prayer, fasting and good works – the *tripod* of Great Lent. Many services are offered on the weekdays of Lent in your parish, so check your church bulletins and clear some time in your life to participate in them. Special themes are given on each Sunday of the Fast for our edification, calling us to change. We are called to be icons of Christ and imitators of the saints. The Lord's cross is our call to duty. We reflect upon the virtues needed to make a drastic change in our lives. Don't be passive but make your Great Lent an active time of "doing" and recommitting yourselves to Christ.

Enter the Lord's passion during Holy Week, walk with Him to His death and die with Him to your old self. When the first proclamation of "Christ is risen" is shouted out, His joy will be your joy and you can say "and I am risen too," a new person recommitted to being another Christ in the world.

I recommend to you the attached explanation of fasting according to the ancient discipline of the Byzantine Churches and the rule for fasting in the Eparchy of Newton. Through your observance of the Lenten springtime, may Christ our God bless you with new life.

Yours in Christ God,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "+ Nicholas".

✠ Most Reverend Nicholas J. Samra
Bishop of Newton

Fasting According to the Ancient Discipline of the Byzantine Churches

With St. Paul, we urge all to leave the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. We all are sinners in need of *metanoia* (repentance) in order to be rid of sin, the passions, and everything that enslaves us with regard to food and drink, clothing, pleasure, jealousy, anger, hatred, pride, obstinacy, calumny, amusements, and superficiality. He who commits sin is not free, but is the slave of sin. Great Lent is a time of purity, holiness, prayer, and liberation from sin, evil and corruption: a time very pleasing to God, a time of salvation, and a spiritual springtime preparing us to shine with the light of the glorious Resurrection. We exhort the faithful to take on the discipline of fasting and abstinence that our fathers and ancestors always practiced. My brothers and sisters, “repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!”

What is the traditional fast and abstinence?

Fasting: is abstaining from any food and drink from midnight until Vespers (prayers at sunset). So, the person fasting eats only a single meal a day after Vespers or after the Liturgy of the Presanctified.

Abstinence: is abstaining from meat, dairy products, and eggs, while fish is permitted on the Annunciation and Palm Sunday. Wine and oil are permitted on certain days.

Days of fasting during Great Lent: Monday through Friday throughout Lent and Holy Week. Great and Holy Saturday is the only Saturday of the year on which one must keep a fast; otherwise it is forbidden to fast on Saturdays. Sunday, the day of Resurrection, is never a fast day.

Days of abstinence: the whole of Great Lent, including Sundays and all of Holy Week, except Annunciation and Palm Sunday when fish may be eaten.

Rule of fasting in the Eparchy of Newton

So as not to burden anyone’s conscience, the Holy Synod of the Melkite Church permits each eparchial bishop to ease the canonical obligations of fasting, while, at the same time, exhorts all the faithful to fast according to the ancient tradition.

The minimum rule that Melkites in the Eparchy of Newton must observe: ***Fasting*** from all food and drink from midnight until noon must be observed on the first day of Great Lent (Monday, 20 February), and on the last three days of Holy Week (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday). ***Abstinence***, at least from meat, must be observed on every Friday of Great Lent. These requirements are the minimum. The faithful are encouraged to do more, such as also abstaining from meat every Wednesday or throughout the whole of Great Lent.