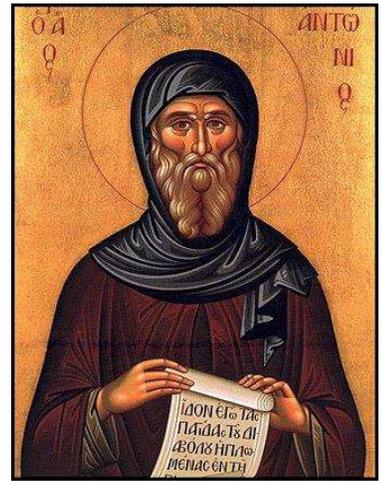


St. Anthony's Scroll

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Taking Lent Seriously

By +Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

An excerpt from his book titled *Great Lent*

What could be not only a normal but a real impact of Lent on our existence? This existence (do we need to recall it) is very different from the one people led when all these services, hymns, canons, and prescriptions were composed and established. One lived then in a relatively small, mainly rural community within one organically Orthodox world; the very rhythm of one's life was shaped by the Church. Now, however, we live in an enormous urban, technological society which is pluralistic in its religious beliefs, secularistic in its worldview, and in which we Orthodox constitute an insignificant minority. Lent is no longer "visible" as it was, let us say, in Russia or in Greece. Our question thus is a very real one; how can we—besides introducing one or two "symbolical" changes into our daily life—keep Lent?

It is obvious, for example, that for the great majority of the faithful the daily attendance at Lenten worship is out of the question. They continue to go to church on Sundays, but, as we already know, on Sundays of Lent the Liturgy, at least in its externals, does not reflect Lent and thus one can hardly have even a "feel" of the Lenten type of worship, the main means by which the spirit of Lent is communicated to us. And since Lent is in no way reflected in the culture to which we belong, it is no wonder then that ours today is mainly a *negative* understanding of Lent—as a season when certain different things such as meat and fats, dancing and entertainment are forbidden. The popular question, "What are you giving up for

Lent?" is a good summary of that common negative approach. In "positive" terms, Lent is viewed as the time when we must fulfill the annual "obligation" of Confession and Communion "...and not later than Palm Sunday..." as I have read in a parish bulletin. This obligation having been fulfilled, the rest of Lent seems to lose all positive meaning.

Thus it is evident that there has developed a rather deep discrepancy between, on the one hand, the spirit or the "theory" of Lent, which we tried to outline on the basis of Lenten worship, and on the other hand, its common and popular understanding which is very often shared and supported not only by laity but also by clergy themselves. For it is always easier to reduce something spiritual to something formal rather than search for the spiritual behind the formal. We can say without any exaggeration that although Lent is still "observed", it has lost much of its impact on our lives, has ceased to be that bath of repentance and renewal which it is meant to be in the liturgical and spiritual teaching of the Church. But then, can we rediscover it; make it again a spiritual power in the daily reality of our existence? The answer to this question depends primarily, and I would say almost exclusively, on whether or not we are willing to *take Lent seriously*. However, new or different the conditions in which we live today, however real the difficulties and obstacles erected by our modern world, *none* of them is an *absolute* obstacle, none of them makes Lent "impossible." The real root of

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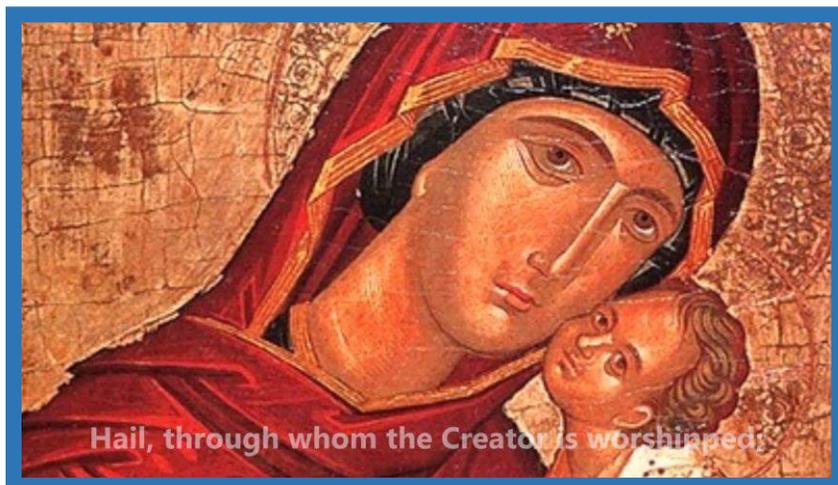
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the progressive loss by Lent of its impact on our lives lies deeper. It is our conscious or unconscious reduction of religion to the superficial nominalism and symbolism which is precisely the way to bypass and to “explain away” the seriousness of religion’s demands on our lives, religion’s demand for commitment and effort. ... In regard to Lent, instead of asking fundamental questions—“What is fasting?” or “What is Lent?”—we satisfy ourselves with Lenten symbolism. In church magazines and bulletins appear recipes for “delicious Lenten dishes,” and a parish might even raise some additional money by means of a well-advertised “tasty Lenten dinner”. So much in our churches is explained symbolically as interesting, colorful, and amusing customs and traditions, as something which connects us not so much with God and a new life in Him but with the past and the customs of our forefathers, that it becomes increasingly difficult to discern behind this religious folklore the utter seriousness of religion. Let me stress that there is nothing wrong in the various customs themselves. When they appeared they were the means and the expressions of a society *taking religion seriously*; they were not symbols, but life itself. What happened, however, was that as life changed and became less and less shaped by religion in its totality, a few customs survived as symbols of a way of life no longer lived. And what survived was that which on the one hand is most colorful and on the other hand the least difficult. The spiritual danger here is that little by little one begins to understand religion itself as a system of symbols and customs rather than to understand the latter as a challenge to

spiritual renewal and effort. More effort goes into preparing Lenten dishes or Easter baskets than into fasting and participation in the spiritual reality of Easter. This means that as long as customs and traditions are not connected again with the total religious worldview which produced them, as long as symbols are not taken *seriously*, the Church will remain disconnected from life and have no power over life. Instead of symbolizing our “rich heritage”, we must start integrating it into our real life.

To *take Lent seriously* means then that we will consider it first of all on the deepest possible level—as a spiritual challenge which requires a response, a decision, a plan, a continuous effort. It is for this reason, as we know, that the weeks of preparation for Lent were established by the Church. This is the time for the response, for the decision and the planning. And the best and easiest way here is to follow the Church’s guidance—be it only by meditating on the five Gospel themes offered to us on the five Sundays of the pre-Lenten season: That of desire (*Zacchaeus*), of humility (*Publican and Pharisee*), of the return from exile (*Prodigal Son*), of the judgment (*Last Judgment*) and of forgiveness (*Forgiveness Sunday*). These Gospel lessons are not merely to be listened to in church; the whole point is that they are to be “taken home” and meditated upon in terms of *my* life, *my* family situation, *my* professional obligations, *my* concern for material things, *my* relation to the concrete human beings with whom I live.

Friday Night Lights...or...Friday Night Lents?



**Join us on Friday nights
during Lent for
the Akathist Service.**

The service begins at 7:00pm,
it's about 45 minutes short!

Reflections on the 2017 DOWAMA Clergy Brotherhood Retreat

Deacon Photios Beekman

Fr. Anthony and I, along with many of the diocesan clergy gathered in Wichita from February 7th-10th for the 45th annual DOWAMA Clergy Brotherhood Retreat. This year's speaker was Metropolitan JOHN (Pelushi) of the Church of Albania who addressed the theme "Witnessing to our Faith before the World".

His Eminence focused his remarks on the experience of the Church in Albania, which emerged from Nazi occupation after World War II, like much of eastern Europe under the control of a communist government. The country was ruled by the dictator, Enver Hoxha, for 40 years from 1945 until his death in 1985. Hoxha, and his party, were determined to create what they would later call the world's "first atheist state." To that end the government of the People's Republic of Albania carried out one of the most aggressive campaigns of religious persecution of the twentieth century. All religious expression was punishable by imprisonment. Churches and other religious facilities were confiscated and repurposed by the government, and many religious leaders were arrested and executed. The secular purge was so comprehensive that by the time communism was overthrown for democracy in 1992, memories of the Church were nearly eliminated from Albanian society. Such were the conditions in which the remaining faithful began the process of rebuilding the Orthodox Church.

Metropolitan JOHN was baptized in this time of communist persecution. The story of this pivotal event in his life is something very few of us can really imagine. Like a scene in some dark film, His Eminence was baptized secretly at night in the basement of a home attended only by the priest and a witness, while another of the faithful stood watch outside the home. For all involved, this was an act of truly courageous faith. In time, His Eminence was drawn to pursue theological education. This, of course, was impossible in Albania, so he left for America and eventually graduated from seminary at Holy Cross. When communism was ended in Albania, His Eminence was able to return as a teacher and minister.

The communist purge had nearly annihilated all memory of the Church among the people and the task of the Albanian faithful was daunting. The resurrected Church in Albania was tasked with so much more than simply re-educating its people in Orthodox doctrine. Local traditions had been nearly lost, the shared traditions of Christian life were foreign, and even something as taken for granted as church etiquette had to be patiently taught. In illustrating this latter circumstance, His Eminence related a humorous incident from early in his ministry there. Once, while serving the Divine Liturgy, His Eminence turned to bless the people and was surprised to find two men of the parish calmly sitting and smoking cigars. "They didn't know

any better," His Eminence explained to the retreat attendees. In sharing this anecdote, Metropolitan JOHN was making the point that the witness of the Church must be that of a compassionate teacher who is willing to patiently guide people in all matters of the faith, no matter how trivial or obvious they may appear.

I cannot fully imagine the burden of ministry which the faithful of the Church of Albania carried through the dark years of communist oppression, nor the mingling of joy and frustration which must have accompanied the Church's rebirth. Despite the struggles, the very existence of the Holy Church in Albania is a miracle. Its people bear the cross of Christ, and they endure with the grace of the Holy Spirit. His Eminence was happy to remind us all that we all share in the joy of this miracle. Their Church is also our Church; their miracle is our miracle.

The situation of the Church in America is, in appearance, very different. Our Church is relatively prosperous and we do not endure physical persecution as the Albanians did. The destruction wrought by the communist government was overtly anti-Christian. In our society the loss of Christian identity is more deceptive. The secularism which now permeates our culture has slowly evolved from religious scholasticism and the so-called enlightenment of the west. As we approach the commemoration of St. Gregory Palamas I am reminded that despite his triumph centuries ago, we are still struggling against the secularizing intellectualism which dominates American thought and dialogue. The Orthodox in America are a significant minority, and the shared life in Christ as it is taught by the Church is often in opposition to our individualistic, selfish culture.

Witnessing to our faith in America is a struggle which is vastly different in nature from that which Metropolitan JOHN and the faithful in Albania have faced, but it is, nonetheless, a real one. For many of our clergy the challenges of this witness are a full-time concern. While their most visible duties, of course, are celebration of the divine services, a priest's responsibility is to guide the faithful in the sacramental life in Christ. Particularly in smaller parishes, the duties of a single priest can become emotionally overwhelming. The clergy brotherhood retreat is a brief respite from the oftentimes isolating work of ministry. There is joy in brotherhood, and comfort in shared experience. We, at St. Anthony, are blessed with many faithful, pious, and generous parishioners who willing work alongside our priest to bring the witness of our shared faith to our community. As we struggle to live a Christian life against the negative influences of our culture, especially during the period of Great Lent, we can take comfort in the unity of the Church. We share in the joy of all the Orthodox faithful in witnessing the miraculous rebirth of the Church in Albania, and pray that our witness to the people of this community may be likewise profitable for the world.

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Rev. Dn. Photios Beekman ~ Deacon

Ms. Adella Winder ~ Youth Director

Mrs. Bonnie Kokkinis ~ Secretary

WEDNESDAYS of LENT

What exactly is a “Pre-Sanctified Liturgy”?

On each Wednesday of Lent, we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, but we call it “Pre-Sanctified” because the Eucharist which we partake of, the Body and Blood of Christ, is already sanctified.

On Sundays during the Divine Liturgy, when you hear the priest chanting, “Holy Things are for the Holy”, he’s usually lifting up one Lamb (Bread), but during Lent, he’s holding up two.

The second one is reserved for Wednesday evening.

The Pre-Sanctified Liturgy is a very solemn and prayerful service. We prepare ourselves throughout the day in various ways: by spiritual readings, prayer, silence, and fasting, especially if you’re planning to receive Holy Communion.

The general rule of thumb if you’re planning to receive Holy Communion is to begin your fast (abstaining from all food and drink) after your noon-day meal. This is a great time of year for our parish and most Orthodox parishes because following the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, we share a Lenten Pot-Luck Dinner.

For those curious about time: the evening service begins at 7:00, ends about 8:15, and the dinner ends about 9 (or whenever you leave)!