



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF CHICAGO

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΣΙΚΑΓΟΥ

To the Sacred Clergy, the Monastic Brotherhoods and Sisterhoods, and the blessed laity of the Sacred Metropolis of Chicago.

Beloved fathers and brethren, Beloved children in the Lord,

Every morning we ask ourselves, “What shall I wear?” As we put on our bodily garments, however, we should ask even more urgently each day, “How is my soul clothed: poorly or well?” Throughout the *Triodion*, Great Lent, and Holy Week, the theme of *spiritual vesture* comes to the fore in our hymns and Scripture readings.

In his monumental Great Canon of repentance, Saint Andrew of Crete invokes repeatedly the image of the “garments of skin” that clothed Adam and Eve after their banishment from Paradise (Genesis 3:21).

Sin has stripped me of the robe that God once wove for me, and it has sewed for me garments of skin. I am clothed with the raiment of shame as with fig leaves, in condemnation of my self-willed passions. I am clad in a garment that is defiled and shamefully bloodstained by a life of passion and self-indulgence (*Tuesday of the First Week).

Our soul’s garment is said to be bloodstained by the murder of our brothers and our sisters: whether through overt acts of violence, passive indifference to their plight, or simply in attitudes of anger, hard-heartedness, or hatred that Christ equates with murder (Matthew 5:21-23, 1 John 3:15). With each Baptism we chant, as we also shall at Pascha, “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have been clothed in Christ” (Galatians 3:27). To put on Christ means to take up His ways of gentleness, mercy, forbearance, and love.

Hard hearts and callous souls are the antithesis of the new life in Christ. So says Saint Paul in his Epistle to the Colossians (3:12-14): “*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*”

Lent is an opportunity to shed the callousness of our hearts, the “garments of skins,” and to receive from the Bridegroom of our souls the radiant vesture of the coming Kingdom. This clothing is a gift from our merciful and loving God. However, we also need to prepare ourselves to receive this gift through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, along with seeking and granting

forgiveness. Through these disciplines, we trade “a life of passion and self-indulgence” for Christ’s ways of purity and self-denial and sacrifice.

The entirety of our Lenten journey is a program for the “de-callousing” of our hearts, the shedding of those dead garments of skins so that we can be clothed in the virtues of Christ. The First Week of Great and Holy Lent culminates in the Sunday of Orthodoxy, when we celebrate the Restoration of the Holy Icons in God’s Church. Neuroscientists have recently been discovering that a picture of a loved one can reduce pain, relieve stress, and boost the immune system. Spend five minutes each day this week just gazing at the icon of the Lord, looking into those eyes of perfect love. In the healing that comes from His Holy Face, receive the power to shine forth His peace and mercy to those around you.

The Second Week of Great Lent leads up to the Commemoration of our righteous Father, Saint Gregory Palamas. Saint Gregory was a great proponent of hesychasm, a discipline of prayerful stillness. Try to set apart some time each day in this week to stand or sit in prayerful silence, having turned off your phone, radio, television, and computer. Listen for the still, small voice of the Lord in those times of absolute silence, ending your time of peace with the repetition of the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The Third Week of Lent leads us toward the Sunday of the Veneration of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross. As we contemplate the sufferings of the Lord for our salvation, think of ways each day by which you can open your heart to the sufferings of others. Apply the proceeds of your fasting towards a donation for the needy. Take time to call someone who might benefit from a listening ear and a kind word. Make a point of seeking out difficult people in your life and showing them kindness in deed and word. Set a goal each day of finding one practical way to alleviate the suffering around you.

The Fourth Week brings us to the Commemoration of our righteous Father, Saint John Climacus. His book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, can be difficult reading for the uninitiated. However, the main idea of mindfully acquiring virtue is something we can all follow. If you have not sought the Sacrament of Confession in a long time, this would be a good week to prepare for and schedule one with your spiritual father. Meditate not only on the things you have done wrong, but also on the good deeds you have left undone. Resolve to pursue all the fruit of the Spirit that Saint Paul lists in Galatians 5:22-23. Ask God each day in your time of prayer to make tender your conscience and to speak repentance to your heart.

The Fifth Week culminates in the Commemoration of our righteous Mother, Saint Mary of Egypt. She left the world and spent her life alone in the wilderness, until the day that Saint Zosimas brought her Holy Communion, after which she departed this life for the Kingdom of God. In this week, develop more fully a practice of preparing for Holy Communion through the prayer rules offered by the Church. Each day, read one or more of the Prayers of Preparation for Holy Communion or two or three Odes of the Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion.

(These are readily found online.) Let the beauty of these words sink into your soul, and notice how the prayers evoke in your soul the true glory of receiving Christ's Body and Blood.

The Sixth Week leads into Holy Week. Commit to spending some time each day reading through a service of Holy Week that is to follow. These services become all the more meaningful as their words and themes become familiar to us. Try to notice the ebb and flow of Holy Week, culminating in the Passion of our Lord and His glorious Resurrection. Invest some time in getting to know the services, and you will find your experience at Pascha to be doubly and triply rewarding.

In these small but practical ways, we can strengthen our Lenten work of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and forgiveness. The goal of the season is not to make us more self-righteous and austere, but rather more tender-hearted and compassionate, with souls soft and open to one another, clothed in Christ and prepared to enter the Kingdom of God in childlike purity and humility.

This year, I invite you all to [Live Lent](#) with me. *Live Lent* will act as companion for all of us to engage Great and Holy Lent with weekly themes, spiritual vitamins, practical actions that we can use to “de-callous” our hearts by taking action during the journey to Great and Holy Pascha – to Live Lent. Each week, *Live Lent* will focus on a specific theme, announced each Sunday, along with other resources to make the journey actionable. To *Live Lent* with me, keep an eye on our media channels through each week, and visit our [Live Lent webpage](#).

And so, may we chant together on Holy Monday evening:

*O Bridegroom, more beautiful than all other men, You have invited us to the spiritual banquet of your bridal chamber. Divest my ill-clad form of offences by my participation in Your sufferings. And when You have adorned me with the glorious apparel of Your beauty, show me to be a radiant guest of Your kingdom, since You are compassionate (*Aposticha).*

May you have a blessed Holy and Great Lent.

With paternal blessings and love in Christ,



† Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago

*Translations are from the AGES Initiative Digital Chant Stand texts