

LENT, HOLY WEEK & EASTER

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The most inspiring and meaningful periods of the liturgical year in the Orthodox Church are Lent, Holy Week and Easter. An existential encounter takes place between us and Christ in the events of his forty days of fasting, crucifixion and resurrection. These sacred events are mystically present in the church here and now. Easter is our return every year to our own baptism. Lent is our preparation for that return. During the Holy Week, the Church re-enacts before us the entire Passion of Christ. At no other time of the year do we have the opportunity to experience the love of Christ as powerfully as during the Holy Week. For forty days following Easter, Orthodox Church members greet one another with the words “Christ is risen” and hear the joyful response “Truly He is risen”.

Christian perspective is intrinsically eschatological. Christian eschatology tells us that the life we now live will not come to an end. It is headed somewhere. Our years on earth however many or few are not the whole story. This is in contrast to the secular eschatology of “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die” which is an outcome of Epicurean philosophy. Our Christian faith also tells us that God is more powerful than death. The cross was not the end for Jesus; neither will it be the end for those who believe in Him. In Christ, death cannot destroy life. The promise of life after death is assured solely by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. This is the mystery of Easter.

It has been said that an Orthodox Christian is one who lives from Easter to Easter. The liturgical year revolves around the crucified and risen Christ. Easter is the hinge on which the whole church year swings. It is the greatest and most exalted feast, the feast of the feasts in the Orthodox Church. As Easter is the center of the year, so Sunday which is a “little Easter” is the center of the week. Easter falls between March

22nd and April 25th on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox (the time in spring when the day and night are of equal length – March 21st). Easter will be celebrated on 12th April this year, 4th April in 2010 and 24th April in 2011. The specific day for celebrating Easter was decided by the First Council of Nicaea held in 325 A.D. This council considered as the most important and venerable event of the fourth century was attended by 318 enlightened Church Bishops and Fathers from all over the world, many of whom came bearing the marks and scars of persecution and torture on their bodies.

Cross, lamb, lights, eggs, rabbit, the plant lily, phoenix bird and peacock are all considered as Easter symbols. Just as the egg appears to be lifeless, so too did the body of Christ appear to be a mere corpse. But as the egg can contain life, so does Christ contain the life we receive through his Resurrection. According to ancient mythology, the beautiful phoenix bird lived for 500 years and then burned itself to death on a pyre from whose ashes another phoenix arose. Christ's life in an earthly form was destroyed through crucifixion, but a new and greater life came about as a result of His Resurrection. The peacock has an unusually beautiful tail. However each year the bird loses its beauty during the molting season. After this a new and more beautiful tail appears. So also the mystery, the awe and the greatness of Christ is enhanced countless times during the Resurrection. To some the rabbit symbolizes birth and new life as well as the moon. Since the moon determines the date of Easter, it may be an appropriate symbol.

Valia Nombu (The Great Lent) begins on Monday, 23rd February this year. For Western churches, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, 25th February. The actual preparation for Lent begins on Sunday, 22nd of February called "Kothine or Pethratho Sunday". The day's Gospel reading is to remember the first miracle of our Lord i.e. water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. This is the first sign of His signs envisaging us the message "The Kingdom of Heaven has come bearing the fruits of repentance". It denotes a complete change in life among members of the church through fast and participation in the Passion of our Lord. Lent commemorates the forty day fast

of our Lord. Lent should bring religion into our daily life like a bloodstream in the body of daily behavior.

Fasting is to show our love of God with true sentiments of sorrow for sin and charity towards others. Giving up of food is an act of self-denial. By fasting we are identifying with many who don't have even one meal a day. It also promotes good health and gives rest to our intestinal system. It also helps to control weight, a serious contemporary concern with many. Adults are expected to fast until evening 3 pm during the Great Lent. Fasting is a virtue by Grace, but enforced fasting ceases to be a virtue. Enforced religion is a travesty of true religion. Fasting is a self disciplined mental experience before God. By observing fasting, we are presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice acceptable to Him (Romans 12.1). Prayer, prostration during prayers, repentance, penitence, charity to the deserving poor, confession, receiving the Holy Communion, reconciliation and abstaining from non-vegetarian food are all integral to a meaningful Lent.

May the Almighty God shower His blessings upon each one of us so that our journey through the Lenten days is a wonderful experience to witness Risen Christ our God and Lord.

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