

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Today is the last Sunday of Great Lent. I know when I first heard this I was confused. What about Palm Sunday? Isn't Palm Sunday also a Sunday of Lent? The answer is no, it's not. In fact, Lazarus Saturday, which is the day before Palm Sunday is not part of Great Lent either. The fast began on the Monday following Forgiveness Sunday and it ends next Friday night.

So, I said my priest: "Then I can eat meat on Saturday and Sunday." I knew that we could eat fish on Palm Sunday since it is a great feast of our Lord's. He just shook his head at me and said, "Although Great Lent is over, next Saturday we begin Holy Week." It does get confusing.

Although we are forbidden to fast on Saturday and Sunday during Great Lent, since one is the Lord's day and the other is the Day of the Lord, we still count them as part of the Fast. And if you count the days between Forgiveness Sunday and Lazarus Saturday there are 40 days.

It is especially apparent on the years when the Orthodox and the West celebrate Pascha and Easter on the same date, that we count the days of great Lent differently. The Orthodox Fast always begin on a Monday and in the West their fast always begins on a Wednesday.

The West does not count Sundays as part of Lent. And they also consider Holy Week to be part of Lent. If you count the days between Ash Wednesday and Holy Saturday but don't count the Sundays there are 40 days.

I asked my priest, "If we are not supposed to fast on Saturdays and Sundays, why can't we eat meat on the weekends?" The answer is "We still keep fasting from certain foods such as meat, poultry and dairy, but we do not fast from eating food as we do during the week." If you remember during Great Lent we are supposed to restrict how much food we eat during the week. Many people eat only one meal and that is after sunset. Others who do not have the strength to do this, do not eat between meals and leave the table still hungry.

During Holy Week, on the first three days, we are to eat only one meal each day, with xerophagy; but some try to keep a complete fast on these days, or else they

eat only uncooked food, as on the opening days of the first week. Remember xerophagy means that we may eat only vegetables cooked with water and salt, and also such things as fruit, nuts, bread and honey. In practice, octopus and shell-fish are also allowed on days of xerophagy; also, vegetable margarine and corn or other vegetable oil are allowed but not oil made from olives.

On Holy Thursday one meal is eaten, with wine and olive oil.

On Great Friday, those who have the strength, follow the practice of the early Church and keep a total fast. Those unable to do this may eat bread, with a little water, tea or fruit-juice, but not until sunset, or at any rate not until after the veneration of the Epitaphion at Vespers.

On Holy Saturday there is in principle no meal, since according to the ancient practice after the end of the Liturgy of St. Basil the faithful remained in church for the reading of the Acts of the Apostles, and for their sustenance were given a little bread and dried fruit, with a cup of wine. If, as usually happens now, they return home for a meal, they may use wine but not oil; for on this one Saturday, alone among the Saturdays of the year, that olive oil is not permitted.

Even if we have not fasted as we should, let us spend these last few days of Great Lent fasting to the best of our ability. Let the fasting from food help us control our passions so that we may grow in love for God and each other.

I feel that it is of extra importance to keep the fast and pray as much as we can since we cannot attend the usual services at church this year.

In today's Gospel, we heard Jesus predicting His death and resurrection for the third time.

At that time, Jesus took His twelve Disciples, and began to tell them what was to happen to Him, saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit upon Him, and kill Him; and after three days He will rise."

Why does Jesus foretell the things that will happen to him? He does this to prepare and calm the minds of the disciples. Having heard of these things beforehand the disciples would more easily endure them, and not be overwhelmed all at once in their anguish.

Jesus also foretold these things so that they would know that he suffered them of his own will. For although he knows these things beforehand, and is able to flee from them, he does not do so, and thus he makes it abundantly clear that he gives himself over to his sufferings willingly.

The Lord took the disciples aside privately, to speak with them alone. For His Passion is a mystery to be revealed only to those closest to him. And this is why on the road He leads the way before them all, wanting to separate His disciples from the rest of the crowd. But also, by leading the way, He knows that He hastens to His Passion, and does not evade His death which is for our salvation. And although he tells of all the horrible things that will happen, yet there is one consolation, that He will rise on the third day.

Is clear that his disciples still did not understand what He was telling them. We know this since James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward and asked Jesus if they could sit one on His left and one on His right when He entered into His kingdom. It is probable, that hearing what Jesus said, they mistakenly thought that the reason they are going to Jerusalem was to have Him anointed king of Israel, thus He would be the Messiah as they knew it. He then would be persecuted and put to death, but would rise again on the third day.

Jesus assured them that they misunderstood what He was teaching them. They would not be the ones to determine who sat at His right and His left. The seats were already prepared for others. He asked them if they would be willing to suffer as He was going to suffer and they said they were. Jesus told them that yes, they would suffer the same. James was beheaded in Jerusalem in the year 45 A.D. and John was cruelly tortured in Rome and then exiled to the island Patmos.

Jesus uses this event to teach an important lesson to the disciples. He told them "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you;

but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be servant of all.

We must take this teaching to heart. When we are given authority over people we must humble ourselves and be their servants. We must be willing to place their needs over ours. If we wish to be great in the kingdom of heaven, we must be servants to all. This is important to keep in mind. In today's society, ambition and status are valued more than helping our neighbor. To be first in the kingdom of heaven, which is better than being first in anything in this life, we must be last and a servant to all.

We also commemorate Mary of Egypt today.

Our holy mother Mary was born in Egypt. She had left her parents at the age of twelve to go to Alexandria, where she spent the next seventeen years in debauchery and great sinfulness. Living on charity and linen weaving, she nevertheless offered her body to any man, not being forced to it by dire necessity as were so many poor women, but as though she were consumed by the fire of a desire that nothing was able to appease. One day, seeing a crowd of Libyans and Egyptians moving towards the port, she followed them and set sail with them for Jerusalem, offering her body to pay for her fare.

When they arrived in the Holy City, she followed the crowd that was thronging towards the Church of the Resurrection, since it was the day of the Exaltation of the Cross and the Cross was kept there. But, when she reached the threshold of the church, an invisible force prevented her entering in spite of repeated efforts on her part, although the other pilgrims were able to go in without hindrance. Left alone in a corner of the narthex, she began to realize that it was the impurity of her life that was preventing her approaching the holy Wood. She burst into tears and smote her breast and, seeing an icon of the Mother of God, made this prayer to her: "O Sovereign Lady, who didst bear God in the flesh, I know that I should not dare to look upon thine icon, thou who are pure in soul and body, because, debauched as I am, I must fill thee with disgust. But, as the God born of thee became man in order to call sinners to repentance, come to my aid! Allow me to go into the church and prostrate before His Cross. And, as soon as I have seen the Cross, I promise that I will renounce the world and all pleasures, and follow the path of salvation that thou wilt show me."

She felt herself suddenly freed from the power that had held her and was able to enter the church. There she fervently venerated the Holy Cross and then, returning to the icon of the Mother of God, declared herself ready to follow the path that the Virgin would show her. A voice replied to her from on high: "If you cross the Jordan, you will find rest."

Leaving the church, she bought three loaves of bread with the alms a pilgrim had given her. She discovered which road led to the Jordan and arrived in the evening at the Church of Saint John the Baptist. After having washed in the river, she received Holy Communion. She then ate half of one of the loaves and went to sleep on the riverbank. The next morning, she crossed the river and lived from that time on in the desert, remaining there for forty-seven years without ever encountering either another human being or any animal.

During the first seventeen years, her clothes soon fell into rags. She was burning with heat by day and shivering with cold by night and she fed on herbs and wild roots. But more than the physical trials, she had to face violent assaults from the passions and the memory of her sins and, throwing herself on the ground, she implored the Mother of God to come to her aid. Protected by God, who desires nothing but that the sinner should turn to Him and live, she uprooted all the passions from her heart by means of this extraordinary asceticism, and was able to turn the fire of carnal desire into a flame of divine love that made it possible for her to endure the implacable desert with joy, as though she were not in the flesh.

After all these years, a holy elder called Zosimas, who, following the tradition instituted by Saint Euthymios, had gone into the desert across the Jordan for the period of the Great Fast, saw one day a human form with a body blackened by the sun and with hair white as bleached linen to its shoulders. He ran after this apparition that fled before him, begging it to give him its blessing and some saving words. When he came within ear-shot, Mary, called him by name although she had never seen him before. She revealed to him that she was a woman and asked him to throw her his cloak that she might cover her nakedness.

At the urging of the monk, the Saint recounted to him with tears the story of her life and conversion. Then, having finished her account, she begged him to come the following year to the bank of the Jordan with Holy Communion.

When the day arrived, Zosimas saw Mary appearing on the further bank of the river. She made the sign of the Cross and crossed the Jordan, walking on the water. Having received Holy Communion weeping, she said: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation" (Luke 2:29). She then took leave of Zosimas, asking him to meet her the following year in the place where they had first met.

When the year was past, Zosimas, going to the agreed spot, found the Saint's body stretched on the ground, her arms crossed and her face turned towards the East. His tearful emotion prevented him from noticing at once an inscription traced on the ground by the Saint, which read: "Abba Zosimas, bury here the body of the humble Mary; give what is of dust to dust, after having prayed for me. I died on the first day of April, the very night of the Passion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, after having partaken in the Holy Eucharist." Consoled in his grief by having learned the Saint's name, Zosimas was amazed to discover that she had, in several hours, covered a distance of more than twenty days' walk. After having tried in vain to break up the earth with a stick, he suddenly saw a lion approaching Mary's body and licking her feet. Remember, Mary had said that she had not seen an animal during her entire time in the desert. Zosimas was surprised to see the lion approach Mary's body as if he had been her pet. On the orders of the Elder, the lion dug a hole with its claws, in which Zosimas devoutly placed the Saint's body.

On his return to the monastery, he recounted the marvels that God had wrought for those who turn away from sin and move towards Him with all their hearts. From the hardened sinner that she had been, Mary has, for a great many souls crushed under the burden of sin, become a source of hope and a model of conversion. This is why the Holy Fathers have placed the celebration of her memory at the end of the Great Fast as an encouragement for all who have neglected their salvation, proclaiming that repentance can bring them back to God even at the eleventh hour.