

MESSAGE ON THE COMMENCEMENT OF HOLY AND GREAT LENT 2019
To the clergy, monastics and faithful of our God-protected Diocese

This Sunday we look to forgiveness as we enter the holy journey of Great Lent. Forgiveness is truly a “breakthrough” of the Kingdom into this fallen world. The Church gives us the gift of Great Lent so that we can find true renewal in Christ. Only a repentant heart is on the path to the return to unity and love.

As the sacred hymnography of the Church urges us, all the ascetic elements—fasting, abstinence, frugality, restriction of personal desires, intense prayer, almsgiving, and confession—are essential to the period of Great Lent. They are preconditions for our Eucharistic communion with God and movement of love, and the reunion and harmony with others. Just as the sacrifice on the Cross takes its meaning from the Resurrection, so all our Lenten effort find their fulfillment in Holy Communion.

However, for all too many today, the fast is only identified with eating certain foods and avoiding certain others. This has unfortunately annulled the other important fasts which are found in the tradition of our faith and which demonstrate the creative nature of Christian fasting. In our tradition, we find four types of fasting: a complete abstaining from food, abstaining from food until mid-afternoon; eating less in order to save money for the purpose of almsgiving, and abstaining not from food, but from one’s favorite activities. What mattered was the *reason* for fasting, not its duration, which was directly dependent on that reason. Also, the real meaning of fasting lay not in *the type of food*, but on *abstinence*. Unfortunately, very often, delicious and luxurious foods are welcomed by some as a form of fasting, provided they do not contain the prohibited non-lenten ingredients. With such practices, wealthy Christians are enabled to be identified as good, for they can “fast” for months on end by eating various types of expensive meals, while poorer Christians are not so, for they cannot afford such expensive cuisine.

Another quandary for our actual understanding of fasting is the reality of those who identify as vegetarians and vegans. What shall the Church subscribe to the vast number of those who never eat meat anyway? According to Church rules concerning fasting, such people already fast all the time. So, our current understanding of fasting deprives them of the possibility to be, from time to time, engaged in this common lenten initiative of the Church, because the Church already views them as fasting from particular foods all the time.

Therefore, in inviting you to the “opened arena of virtues” from our Episcopal seat, I want to encourage you this year, as you fast, to practice *benevolence in the form of almsgiving*. This is an opportunity to reach out to others with the very love of Christ in concrete ways as for example, almsgiving to the poor and those in need. In this case, true fasting (Lent) will become the opposite of *pleonexia* (greed, avarice), i.e., an inhuman approach which leads the contemporary global community into a spiritual crisis.

May His grace be with you during these celebrated seasons and feast.

Given this Day of Forgiveness March 10th, 2019 at Alhambra, California

With love and blessings in Christ,
Bishop Maxim