

THE HOLY ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF BOSTON

His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

LENTEN ENCYCLICAL OF METROPOLITAN EPHRAIM OF BOSTON

To The Beloved Presbyters, Deacons, Monastics and Faithful Flock of our Metropolis

My Beloved Orthodox Christians:

Some years ago, at one of our conferences, I gave a talk on the "athletes of Christ." "Athletes", of course, is a reference to the holy martyrs, and also to the holy ascetics of our Church. As I recall, the main theme of that talk was, "no pain, no gain." That is, no one succeeds in any athletic endeavour without training [that is the original meaning of the Greek work *áskesis* — from whence we derive our English word "asceticism."]

Whether you play baseball, football, hockey, tennis or soccer, or any sport, for that matter, if you don't train strenuously over and over to achieve your maximum ability, very simply, you will not win. No pain, no gain.

The same holds true for this holy fast that we Orthodox Christians have now undertaken in preparation for our Saviour's Resurrection. This period of the fast is given to us by our spiritual coaches — the Holy Fathers — for the purpose of training. We want to strive for mastery — over ourselves, our passions, our weaknesses, the spirit of the world, the devil and his temptations. We want to be athletes of Christ. We want to be ready to give our "all" for Christ — even our very lives, if it comes to that.

But if we are not ready to give up even a little meat for the sake of keeping the Church's holy fast, where will we find moral strength to give up an arm, or a leg, or even our lives for our Saviour, if we should come under persecution for our faith?

We see so many around us that strive for a "corruptible crown," — people who fast because they want to loose weight for the sake of being attractive; others fast on their doctor's orders to preserve their physical health; yet others have abjured meat because they are animal lovers, or perhaps they are afraid of eating some of their "reincarnated" friends or relatives! Another category abstains from certain foods out of fear of harming the environment.

As commendable or laughable as any of these reasons may seem to us, they are taken quite seriously by the people involved. They are, apparently, very dedicated to their "rules of fasting."

Our fasting, however, is not for any transient prize. Our spiritual training, our struggle and contest, is for an incorruptible crown — the goal is life everlasting, companionship with the holy Angels, infinite joy shared with the Saints, and participation in the grace, life and splendor of our Creator and Lord — the Triune Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unto endless ages.

It is the Resurrection of God the Son that we are preparing to welcome by fasting and prayer, just as the People of God prepared to receive the Mosaic Law of old in the wilderness of Sinai; just as our Saviour Himself gave us the example of fasting for forty days before the commencement of His ministry in the Land of Judea.

But, to achieve the desired results, it is important for us to train in the right way. In a letter to a nun, Saint Anatoly of Optina writes the following admonition, to which we would do well to give heed:

You are no longer a worldly young girl, but are numbered among the monastics — among the brides of Christ. And so, you should know not the letter only, but also the mysteries of the Kingdom. For not to eat bread and not to drink water or anything else is not yet fasting, for the demons neither eat or drink anything at all. And yet they are evil and hateful to God. But fasting for us is, as the Church chants, "the estrangement from evil, restraint of tongue, refraining from anger, separation from lust, slanders, lies and false oaths. Abstinence from these things is a true and acceptable fast" [From the Vespers Aposticha, Monday of the First Week of Lent].

A Collection of Letters to Nuns
St. Anatoly of Optina, Letter 320.

Drawing near to God through prayer — both private and that of the Church — strengthened by our reception of the Holy Mysteries, and guided by the instructions of our spiritual trainers, we shall, by the grace and mercy of our Lord and Saviour, be counted worthy of that eternal glory that awaits us if we strive as good athletes of Jesus Christ. To Whom is due all honor, glory and worship, unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Your fervent suppliant unto God,

✠Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

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