

THE HOLY ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF BOSTON
His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

LENTEN ENCYCLICAL
of
His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

My beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

At our Clergy Synaxis in October last year, I had the opportunity to read a translation of a long treatise by Saint Nectarius of Pentapolis on the subject of fasting. Saint Nectarius' study quotes innumerable ancient sources on this matter, and thereby gives us an excellent overview of how we came to have the fasting rules that we have inherited today. Thanks in large part to the efforts of one young mother, a member of the Cathedral parish of St. Mark of Ephesus in Boston, we now have this study of Saint Nectarius in English.

From this treatise by Saint Nectarius, one thing becomes evident immediately: there was a great deal of variety in the length and nature of the fasts that the early Christians kept. This information alone is extremely important, for it serves us well to understand the true nature of the fasts.

Citing many ancient sources, the Saint tells us, for example, that the fast we keep on Wednesdays and Fridays began in the very first century, when the Apostles were still living. We learn also why there is a discrepancy in *The Holy Rudder* regarding the date on which the stricter part of the Nativity fast begins. The Saint tells us, in addition, that from the very time of their conversion to the Orthodox Christian Faith, the Slavic peoples were permitted certain *economias* in the fasting rules because they lived predominantly in the northern, colder latitudes. For the same reason, we learn from our Slavic brethren that the Russian peoples, for example, have a "fasting oil" [i.e. the light vegetable or sunflower oils] as opposed to "non-fasting oil" [olive oil, which is richer and heavier]. We learn also how and why the monastic rules of fasting differ from the fasting rules for the laypeople, and how and why the former came, in many cases, to influence the latter.

Another important work, translated from the Russian language by another young mother, in this instance, a member of the parish of Saint Anna's in Boston, shows us the historical unity of spirit that always existed between the monastics and the laypeople, and how the first served as a light for the second. This work in Russian was written by the holy hieromartyr Hilarion Troitsky in 1915, just ten years after Saint Nectarius wrote his own extensive work on fasting.

It is no coincidence, my beloved, that monasticism began to flourish in the Church just as the great persecutions of the early centuries were beginning to subside. Christianity, from its very inception, was always a heroic faith, requiring great spiritual valor from its children. The very fact that you were a Christian in those early years meant, almost automatically, that you were considered an enemy of the Roman state, and

hence, subject to persecution and a cruel death. As that danger receded, monasticism began to grow as a natural consequence, since the Christians — at that time, at least — understood very well that they were in, but not of, the world. As the Gospel warns: The friendship of the world [i.e., the passions] is enmity with God. At your holy baptism, when you spit upon the devil and all his works, you are declaring war. In such a war, no quarter is given. However, as St. Leo, the Pope of Rome, points out, the respite that the Christians received when the persecutions ended had its own danger: laxity.

It was with such an understanding that the monastics took up their battle against the passions that wage war against us — both the passions within and those around us — and it was with such an understanding that the laypeople who wanted to remain true to their baptismal vows sought to follow in the footsteps of the monastics.

In other words, the spiritual warfare continued unabated. Although one enemy — the persecutors — had been subdued, at least temporarily, many other foes — the soul's passions — continued their warfare against us. Hence, as the monastics honed their skills in spiritual combat, the laypeople followed suit. The prayers, the vigils, the hymnography, all flourished as an expression of this piety and this spiritual struggle. The period of the fasts likewise expanded and became more and more uniform — although variances in this discipline remain to this very day. The point here, however, is that all this growth in the varied expressions of the Church's piety came to pass *because of the need the Christians felt to strengthen their spiritual armament for their struggle against the destructive passions*. Have persecutions ceased? Then, they reasoned, we will use the truce on this *exterior* front to fortify and re-invigorate our battle against our *interior* enemies.

With the help of God, it is our intention to publish in *The True Vine* the above-mentioned works by Saint Nectarius of Pentapolis and Saint Hilarion Troitsky. Both these treatises are works of great scholarship on the one hand, and of many sublime spiritual insights on the other. Also, in the 1994 Lenten Encyclical to our faithful, many thoughts were expressed there which complement what is written here. The ascetical, spiritually heroic character of Christianity is a basic and fundamental part of our Faith. Let us espouse the spiritual armament which our Church offers us, even as a drowning man welcomes the life-saver that is thrown to him, or as a helpless man under attack from ruthless enemies welcomes weapons! Amen. So be it!

Your fervent suppliant unto God,

✠Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

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