



My Beloved Ones,

As we prepare to observe Καθαρά Δευτέρα, Clean Monday, it is important that we begin this Lenten season in the right spirit: one of humility and repentance.

We read in this Sunday's Gospel for Forgiveness Sunday, *"...if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."* (Matthew 6:14-15) Just as the Father called upon His eldest son to celebrate the return of the prodigal brother, so too must we forgive our fellow man, if we hope to begin a new season, clean and refreshed.

As St. Paul says in this week's Epistle to the Romans, it is not for us to judge our neighbors, because God alone can see the hearts of men. *"Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand"* (Romans 14:1-4). As we set off on this coming Lenten journey, we must remember to do so in a spirit of humility, supporting and loving one another, but concerning ourselves only with our obligations to God.

This is also a reminder that the Fast is not, as Jesus tells us, a time to *"...look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men... But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you"* (Matthew 6:16-18). Fasting is not to be a sacrifice of "giving something up"; instead, it is an opportunity to grow closer to God. Only by giving our worries and our passions to Him, will we be strong enough to lift up our cross with Him.

Meat and dairy will eventually spoil, and all our material possessions will eventually pass away. Those things that cannot pass away do not belong to this world. As our Lord tells us in this solemn, but beautiful warning, *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"* (Matthew 6:19-21). Armed with these lessons on the proper Lenten spirits of forgiveness and fasting, may we treasure the Kingdom of Heaven, so that we will be prepared to live out our Lord's Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection.

I wish you all Καλή δύναμη και Καλή Σαρακοστή! Good strength and a blessed Lenten Fast!

+ALEXIOS

Metropolitan of Atlanta