My Beloved Ones,

I greet you with love and joy as we approach the end of the first week of Great Lent! This week’s Gospel serves as preparation for all that we are going to experience with our Lord on our journey through Great Lent—and beyond. The Evangelist John writes of a meeting between Christ, His Disciple Philip, & Philip’s friend, a man named Nathanael. Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee. He knew the Torah, and so when Philip told him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” (John 1:45) Nathanael obviously expected the Messiah to come from David’s city, Bethlehem. Disbelieving, he asked Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’” (John 1:46) As we begin the second week of Lent, the Church invites us also to “Come and see” the One “…who is and who was and who is to come…” (Revelation 1:8).

When Philip brought Nathanael before the Lord, Jesus greeted Him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47) Nathanael was curious: how could Jesus know Him? Our Lord, revealed Himself as the Son of God, when He told Nathanael, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” (John 1:48) Though the mention of a fig tree could seem a detail, Jesus is actually praising Nathanael, because the fig was often used as a symbol of Israel. “During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree.” (1 Kings 4:25) And after this time of positivity and happiness, after the Deportation into Babylon, we read a vision of the Prophet Jeremiah, where the faithful and the faithless are represented as two baskets of figs: “And the Lord said to me, ‘What do you see, Jeremiah?’ I said, ‘Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten” (Jeremiah 24:3). Therefore, for Christ to say that He saw Nathanael sitting under the fig tree was to show him great respect.

Nathanael was astonished that Christ saw into his very heart and welcomed him as a dear friend. It is for this reason that he instantly proclaimed Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, “‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.” (John 1:49) Jesus then explained that seeing Nathanael under the fig tree is not as astonishing as what Nathanael will soon see. “‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man’” (John 1:51).

This first Sunday of Lent is known as “The Sunday of Orthodoxy” when the veneration of icons was restored to the Church in the year 843, after decades of Iconoclasm. I pray that each of you join this Sunday’s commemoration by proclaiming what we know is Orthodox: that icons are tools to teach the Faith, objects to venerate the saints, and a means to witness our Lord and Savior in this life. As we continue to fast and pray, may we hold fast to the Truth our Fathers affirmed, so that we too can be greeted as Nathanael when we stand before His Throne.

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta