

The Services of Great Lent

The holy season of Great Lent is a time of intense preparation for Orthodox Christians. The forty days leading up to Pascha, the glorious celebration of the resurrection of Christ, call for a concentration on repentance, confession and renewal through increased activity in worship, prayer, fasting, confession, almsgiving, etc. We should expect suffering and sacrifice, after the example of our Lord, so that we may share in His victorious life.

In order to appreciate this holy time and appropriate the blessings of God, we should understand the special services of this season. Our minds and hearts should be directed to that purpose as we attend and participate.

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is celebrated each Wednesday evening during Great Lent and on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday mornings of Holy Week. This service is offered to the people as a means of spiritual strengthening in this season of struggle with our passions. Because of its joyful character, the Divine Liturgy has not been celebrated on weekdays during Lent. Therefore, the Church in the early centuries authorized the consecration of additional gifts on the Sundays of Lent to be served to the people on Wednesdays. The tone of these services is solemn and penitential. The church is darkened and the music is quiet. Vestments and cloths are usually deep purple or a dark color. It is one of the most mystical of all the services of the Church -- one that all Orthodox families should attend together during Great Lent. Remember - we prepare for this service by taking no food after lunch on that day.

The Great Canon of St. Andrew is normally read during the first week of Great Lent and again on Thursday of the fifth week. This canon is a four-part series of lamentations showing us the scope and depth of sin, probing the soul with despair, repentance and hope. St. Andrew of Crete, writing in the seventh century, utilized many biblical events and personalities to show the analogy to the sinfulness in our lives. This penetrating service opens the eyes of our minds to see our condition before God and yearn for the blessing of repentance and reconciliation.

The Akathist Hymn to the Theotokos (akathist means "not sitting") is sung on the first five Friday evenings of Great Lent. This hymn is a kontakion (hymn of a season) which consists of twenty four stanzas, or four parts, focusing on the angel's announcement to Mary concerning the Incarnation of the Son of God. This is the only kontakion still sung in its entirety in the Orthodox Church. The glorious birth of the Saviour is vividly set before us as a reminder of our need for forgiveness and restoring our fellowship with the Father. The Feast of the Annunciation is celebrated on March 25.

As we attend these wonderful services, our hearts and souls will be enriched beyond measure. You may expect job-related disturbances, school-related demands on your time and other "incidents" which work against your faithful attendance and concentration in these services. Pray for strength and godly intervention! We will sense afresh the newness of life we have as Orthodox Christians. Let us all prepare for, and fully participate in, these life-giving experiences. Amen.