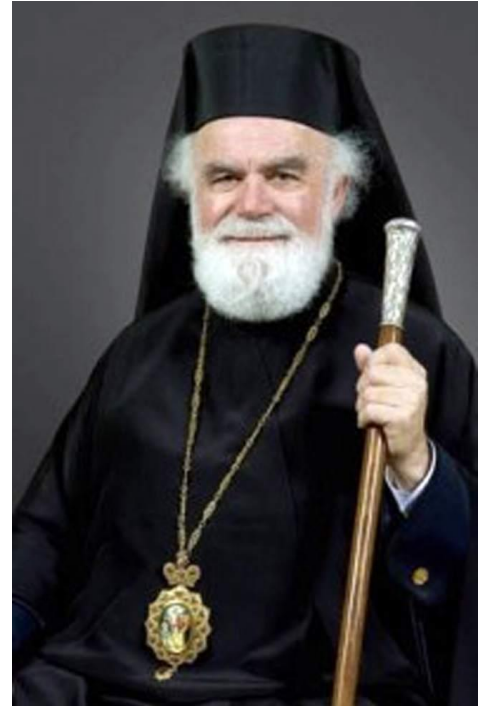


My Beloved Ones,

This coming Sunday we will experience the end of the first part of the Triodion. The past weeks have given us the necessary spiritual exercises to help us on the upcoming 40 day journey: humility, repentance and compassion. This weekend, before we cross into Lent, we are meant to be reminded of forgiveness: seeking our Father's forgiveness, and offering our repentance to our brothers and sisters. In the Gospel of this Forgiveness Sunday, Christ will remind us that, *"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).

This Forgiveness Sunday, represents the closing of a door in more than one way, for the Church Fathers also mark this day as the commemoration of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The first part of the Triodion closes, just as the doors of Paradise are closed to Adam and Eve. Our penitential tears are meant to mirror their own.



The root of Adam and Eve's departure from Paradise can be traced back to their disobedience to our Creator, as they specifically did not heed His command to fast from the fruit of the Tree. We, however, have been given the example of our Lord and Savior, who fasted for 40 days in the desert prior to the beginning of His ministry; and who, also in this Sunday's Gospel, counsels us not to bemoan our fasting, but to *"...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).

Some people view this Lenten period, with its tears and fasting, as a time of sadness. And while the Lenten period is meant to be a time of sober reflection, I believe the more appropriate term is *χαρμολύπη*, which translates to, a kind of "joyful-sorrow". My brothers and sisters, unlike Adam and Eve, our tears are not meant to last. Our Lenten journey will take us, through Christ's saving Crucifixion and Resurrection, back to the doors of Paradise—only now they are open to everyone!

We need only to take our spiritual exercises with us to help us reach the destination. We must fast and pray with humility; we must seek our Father's forgiveness and grant forgiveness to our brother and sister without reservation, and we must show compassion to the least among us. Armed with these tools, we will be well-prepared for the awesome and spiritually rich journey that awaits us.

Καλή Σαρακοστή!

+ALEXIOS

Metropolitan of Atlanta