

WHY WE DO NOT VENERATE THE ICONS UPON RECEIVING THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION: Having just received the Body of Christ, one is filled with the grace of the Sacrament, and one is communing with the Divine Presence. It is therefore superfluous to this action of Grace and Communion to be thinking at this time of venerating the Saints who occupy a lesser place in the heavenly realm. So, it is not necessary to venerate the icons, which play no part in what one is participating in at that time. The communion of Divine Body and Blood is the ultimate act of Orthodox worship and for the rest of the day one should constantly be aware of this fact and act appropriately. In that way, an Orthodox Christian is induced to perform Christian virtues and so progress in his/her spiritual life. It is, however, permissible to kiss the cross at the conclusion of the Liturgy because the cross depicts the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior Who by this act of redemption has given us His Body and Blood and by the grace of receiving It brings us closer to Him. The cross is the instrument of our salvation, and we should venerate it. Please keep this in mind when partaking of the Blessed Sacrament.

GIFT CARD FUNDRAISER: During the month of May, our parish will be holding daily drawings for various gift cards from local businesses. Gift Card Calendars are now available in the church vestibule. Win a \$25 gift card a day, except win a \$50 gift card on Wednesdays. The cost per card is \$10 each or 3 for \$20. Contact Tanya, Mott (570-335-2128), Joanie Zaleski (570-254-6882), Sasha Fedorchak (570-466-8431) or the rectory for your cards.

MEMORIAL SATURDAYS: The second *MEMORIAL SATURDAY* is **March 14th**. You should have received your letter with Hramoty slips. If you did not get one in the mail, there are slips available in the church vestibule. Please do not forget to fill them out and return them before **March 14th** to either Fr. Nathaniel or the sextons. You can also mail them directly to the rectory. Please update your lists from last year with the names of newly departed loved ones.

MISSION SERVICE: Our parish will host a Mission Service on **Sunday, Marcy 29**, St. Mary of Egypt, at **4:00 PM**. If you are willing to help with the meal, a baked good or two, set-up, please contact Fr. Nathaniel. All help will be greatly appreciated. As we journey through Lent, all are invited to attend our Lenten Mission Service on the 29th. Come spend time in prayer, reflection, and community with parishioners from across our area. All are invited and welcome!

BOY SCOUTS PLAN VISIT TO ST. JOHN'S: St. John's will host parishioner Ilya Morse's Boy Scout troop on **Sunday, March 22**, as they attend the Liturgy of St. Basil. After the service, a light Lenten meal will be served in the Church Center. We invite everyone to stay and extend a warm welcome to our visiting Scouts.

Great Lent in the Orthodox Church is one of the richest and most spiritually layered seasons of the Christian year, and a bulletin-ready article works best when it blends clarity, depth, and a sense of discovery. Here is a polished, ready-to-print piece you can use as-is.

Interesting Facts About Great Lent in the Orthodox Church - Great Lent is far more than a period of fasting—it is a carefully structured spiritual journey that prepares the faithful for the joy of Pascha. Its practices, themes, and traditions carry centuries of meaning. These highlights offer a deeper appreciation of what makes Great Lent unique in the Orthodox Christian experience.

A Forty-Day Fast That Isn't the Whole Fast - Great Lent lasts 40 days, ending on the Friday before Lazarus Saturday. But the full Lenten cycle continues through Holy Week, which is liturgically distinct and has its own fast. This means the entire pre-Paschal season is actually 48 days, not counting the preparatory weeks beforehand.

Lent Begins on a Monday, Not a Wednesday - Unlike Western Christianity, which begins Lent on Ash Wednesday, the Orthodox Church begins with Clean Monday. This day emphasizes a fresh start—spiritually and relationally—and is traditionally marked by asking forgiveness, eating simple foods, and beginning the fast with renewed purpose.

The Prayer of St. Ephraim Is the Signature Prayer of Lent - No prayer is more associated with Great Lent than the Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian, which is accompanied by bows and prostrations. Its focus on humility, patience, and love captures the heart of the Lenten struggle.

The Church's Music Changes Dramatically - Lenten services use special melodies that are more subdued and reflective. Even the joyful "Alleluia" replaces "God is the Lord" during weekday services, signaling a shift toward repentance and watchfulness.

Fasting Is Only One Part of the Journey - While the fast traditionally excludes meat, dairy, wine, and oil on most days, the Church teaches that spiritual fasting—from anger, gossip, judgment, and distraction—is even more important. The goal is transformation, not simply dietary discipline.

The Old Testament Takes Center Stage - During Great Lent, the Church reads:

- Genesis (creation and the fall),
- Proverbs (wisdom for daily life), and
- Isaiah (prophecies of salvation).

These readings frame Lent as a return to God's original purpose for humanity.

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts Is Uniquely Lenten - Celebrated on Wednesdays and Fridays, this service—attributed to St. Gregory the Dialogist—offers Holy Communion from gifts consecrated the previous Sunday. Its solemn, candlelit character makes it one of the most beloved services of the season.

The Sundays of Lent Each Have a Special Theme - Every Sunday highlights a different aspect of spiritual renewal:

- Triumph of Orthodoxy — victory of truth over error
- St. Gregory Palamas — the reality of divine grace
- Veneration of the Cross — strength for the journey
- St. John Climacus — spiritual ascent
- St. Mary of Egypt — repentance and transformation

These themes guide the faithful step-by-step toward Pascha.

Lent Is Penitential, but Never Gloomy - Orthodox spirituality avoids despair. Even in the most solemn services, hope is always present. The Church calls Lent a "bright sadness"—a season where repentance opens the heart to joy.

Lent Ends in Blossoming Joy - The fast culminates in the radiant celebration of Pascha, the Feast of Feasts. The contrast between the quiet discipline of Lent and the triumphant proclamation "Christ is Risen!" is intentional, making the joy of the Resurrection shine even more brightly.

ST. GREGORY PALAMAS: The Second Sunday of Great Lent in the Orthodox Church—set aside to honor St. Gregory Palamas—stands as one of the most theologically rich and spiritually practical moments of the entire Lenten journey. It is not simply a commemoration of a historical figure; it is a reminder of what human beings are called to become and how God’s grace works in real lives, real bodies, and real struggles.

The Meaning of the Second Sunday of Great Lent

The Church places St. Gregory Palamas immediately after the Sunday of Orthodoxy for a reason. If the first Sunday celebrates the victory of true faith, the second celebrates the experience of that faith—the lived reality of encountering God.

St. Gregory, a 14th-century monk, bishop, and theologian, defended the teaching that:

- God is infinitely beyond our comprehension in His essence
- Yet God truly shares His life with us through His uncreated energies
- Through prayer, repentance, and purification of the heart, we can experience God directly

This is not abstract theology. It is the foundation of Orthodox spirituality: God is not an idea to be studied but a presence to be encountered.

St. Gregory Palamas: His Life and Witness

St. Gregory was born into a noble family in Constantinople, but he left worldly privilege behind to become a monk on Mount Athos. His life unfolded in three major movements:

- A life of prayer — He immersed himself in hesychasm, the tradition of inner stillness and the Jesus Prayer.
- A life of struggle — He defended the monks of Athos against critics who claimed that direct experience of God was impossible.
- A life of service — He became Archbishop of Thessaloniki, guiding his flock through political turmoil, invasions, and spiritual confusion.

His teaching was affirmed by several councils and is now considered a cornerstone of Orthodox theology.

Why the Church Honors Him During Lent - Great Lent is a season of purification, illumination, and return to God. St.

Gregory’s message fits perfectly:

- Lent is not only about moral improvement; it is about transformation.
- Fasting is not merely a rule; it is a way to clear space for God’s presence.
- Prayer is not simply words; it is a path to union with God.

St. Gregory reminds us that the goal of Lent is nothing less than theosis—becoming by grace what God is by nature.

How St. Gregory’s Story Influences Our Lives Today

Even though he lived 700 years ago, St. Gregory speaks directly to modern struggles. His life offers several lessons that shape how we live, pray, and understand ourselves.

1. The Call to Inner Stillness - In a world of constant noise, distraction, and anxiety, St. Gregory teaches that silence is not emptiness—it is the space where God speaks. The Jesus Prayer—“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”—becomes a lifeline, a way to anchor the heart in God.

2. The Reality of God’s Presence - St. Gregory insists that God is not distant. We encounter Him in:

- the sacraments
- the Scriptures
- the beauty of creation
- the quiet of prayer
- the love we show to others

This transforms faith from a belief system into a relationship.

3. The Courage to Defend Truth – St. Gregory’s life was marked by controversy and misunderstanding.

He teaches us that:

- Truth is worth defending
- Humility and courage can coexist
- Faithfulness sometimes requires standing alone

His example encourages us to hold fast to the Gospel even when culture pushes in other directions.

4. The Possibility of Transformation - St. Gregory’s teaching on the uncreated light—the same light seen by the apostles at the Transfiguration—reminds us that holiness is not for a select few.

Every Christian is called to:

- purification of the heart
- growth in virtue
- deeper prayer
- openness to God’s grace

His message is profoundly hopeful: you can change, you can grow, you can become radiant with God’s light.

5. The Integration of Body and Soul - Gregory emphasizes that salvation is not only spiritual.

Our bodies matter:

- We fast with the body
- We pray with the body
- We serve with the body
- We will be resurrected in the body

This affirms the dignity of human life and the sacredness of everyday actions.

The Second Sunday of Lent as a Personal Invitation - This Sunday is not only a remembrance—it is a call.

It invites each of us to:

- slow down
- return to prayer
- seek God’s presence
- open our hearts to transformation
- rediscover the beauty of silence
- trust that God is nearer than we imagine

St. Gregory Palamas stands as a witness that holiness is possible, not because we are strong, but because God is generous.