

Great Lent
A Time for Hunger and Thirst after Righteousness

Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

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Fourth-Lenten Message

By His Beatitude and Eminence,
Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

Bkerke 2015

Mar Bechara Boutros Rai

Through the Grace of God

**Patriarch of Antioch and All the East
And Cardinal of the Universal Church**

**To Their Excellencies, our brothers, the Bishops,
The Superiors General and Mothers Superior,
The Priests, Deacons, Monks and Nuns,
And all the Sons and Daughters of our Maronite Church
In Lebanon and in the Countries of Expansion,**

May the Peace and Apostolic Blessing be upon you

Introduction

1. Great Lent is a time for hunger and thirst after righteousness, and for satisfaction by God's presence and graces. The message for our Great Lent for this year 2015 is inspired from the fourth beatitude in the Gospel, known as the Constitution of the Christian Life: **"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled"** (Matthew 5: 6). This Beatitude involves the spiritual, moral and material dimensions of human life. The human being is hungry and thirsty for bread and water, consolation and encouragement, health and healing, justice and equity. He/she is hungry to get out of poverty and destitution, hungry for peace and advancement, truth and freedom, love and compassion. He/she is hungry and thirsty for knowledge, education and self-actualization in his/her country, as per his/her talents, dreams and aspirations. He/she is **hungry and thirsty** to please God in a righteous life by spiritual union with Him, and integrity to his/her situation, vocation and responsibilities, and to see the face of God the Father at the end of his/her journey on earth, and to enjoy the glory and mercy of God in Heaven.

No one can fulfill the material, moral and spiritual **hunger and thirst** of anyone **unless they are hungry and thirsty to do good and be righteous**, and unless God fulfills them from His love and mercy, the blessings of His presence, and His words, the words of life and the light of His Holy Spirit.

Hunger and thirst after righteousness and fulfillment, these are the three objectives of **Great Lent**, and we reach them through three actions: **Fasting, prayer and almsgiving**.

Fasting

(Refer to Matthew 6: 16-18)

2. **Fasting is abstinence from eating** from midnight till noon, with the possibility to drink water only; it is also **refraining from eating meat and dairy products on Fridays**, as well as on all days from Ash Monday (February 16th) until Holy Saturday (April 4th), **except during the following feasts**: Saint John Maron (March 2nd), the Forty Martyrs (March 9th), Saint Joseph (March 19th), and the Annunciation (March 25th); **except for Saturday and Sunday**, as per the *Didache*, the Teachings of the Apostolic Law (Year 380). Because **Saturday** is the Memorial of Creation, and **Sunday** is the Memorial of Resurrection. These laws **exclude Holy Saturday** “because the day when the creator was buried, shall not be a day of joy and celebration; as the creator is greater than all His creatures in nature and honor”.

3. **Refraining from eating meat and dairy products** continues **on every Friday** all year round, except for the period between Easter and Pentecost, Christmas and Epiphany, and the liturgical holy days of obligation during which participating in the Mass is a must, such as: Christmas, Epiphany, Presentation of the Temple, Saint Maron, The Ascension, The Apostles Peter and Paul, The Transfiguration, The Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven, The Exaltation of the Holy Cross, All Saints, The Immaculate Conception, and the Patron Saint of the Parish.

4. We should also remind you of the **Old Pious Tradition**, which all Eastern Churches, Catholic and Orthodox, have maintained, which is **fasting during the Lent of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ**, and to make it easier to believers we have limited it from December 16 until the 24th, **the Lent of Saints Peter and Paul** which we have set from June 20 until 28th, and the **Lent of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven** and between August 7 and 14th. We encourage those who can to fast, as well as to abstain from eating meat.

5. All these periods and days of fasting and abstinence are milestones in the life of repentance that the Church is living. They are unique occasions to **organize spiritual retreats** in parishes, and monasteries, as well as in educational, hospitalization and social institutions, to ensure **practicing the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation**, to organize **Group Penance Liturgies** without eliminating **Personal Confession** and individual sacred absolution, to go on **pilgrimage visits** to strengthen the spirit of repentance, and to initiate acts of **love and mercy** towards the poor, the ill and the needy¹.

6. Fasting is an **expression of one's inner repentance**. Refraining from food and from eating meat and dairy products, in addition to the good deeds and acts of love

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1438.

and mercy, fall under the initiatives of penance and compensation for mistakes, sins and evils that were committed.

Fasting is a training of the will, soul and body, in order to achieve victory over one's weakness and deviation, and to attain freedom for the heart.

Fasting is a mandatory law, coming from the Bible, the Old and the New Testaments, and to which Jesus Christ was subjected when he fasted for forty days and forty nights, in preparation for the beginning of his public ministry (see Matthew 4:2). **The Church incorporated this law among its five commandments** and it comes in fourth place. After the **first commandment**, which is commitment to participate in the Mass on Sundays and on Holy Days of Obligation, the **second commandment** states that we shall confess all our sins, at least once a year, and the **third that we shall** receive the Eucharist at least during Easter. The **fourth** is the commitment to fasting and abstinence during the specified times, and **the fifth** is supporting the Church's needs through charity and donations².

7. The purpose of the Church's commandments, in their mandatory nature, is to ensure that believers get the little necessary spirit of prayer and moral commitment, in order to grow in the love of God and people. However, living the commandments is interlinked and nurtured by the liturgical life.

We say the "**Church's Commandments**" because every Christian, man and woman, achieve their vocation **in the Church**, in communion with all those baptized. From Church, they accept the Word of God which includes the teachings of "Christ's Law" (Galatians 6: 2). **From Church**, they learn the example of holiness in the person of the Virgin Mary, who is the ultimate role model, and in the testimony of the lives of those who are living it with authenticity, and in the living spiritual tradition, apparent in the lives of Saints throughout history³.

8. As explained above, **the mandatory aspect of fasting and abstinence are obligations stipulated by the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches**⁴. The sick, the elderly, people taking medications regularly and those who are engaged in strenuous work beyond noon, **are of course exempted** from these laws, provided that they eat a light breakfast, and make up by **prayer and acts of love and compassion**.

Canon 883 of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches illustrates in its first paragraph that: **Christians**, and in this case, **Maronites**, who are outside the Patriarchal Territories of the Middle East, can follow the rules and guidelines adopted in the countries where they reside.

² Same reference, 2042-2043.

³ Same reference, 2030.

⁴ Refer to the list of the Eastern Churches Laws, S. 880.

As for families in which the couple belongs to different Churches with a special right **are allowed** according to the second paragraph of that canon to follow what either of the two Churches determine about fasting and holidays.

Prayer

(Refer to Matthew 6: 5-15)

9. Prayer is another component of the Holy Lent, where every believer goes back to God with the spirit of inner repentance, in order to correct his relationship with God, with himself and with people⁵. For **Saint Therese of the Child Jesus**, prayer is “the rise of the heart by a look towards the sky, it is the cry of gratitude and love for God in the midst of trial as well as in joy”. **Saint John of Damascus** sees it as “Raising the spirit to God and seeking the appropriate bounties”⁶.

Before being words, **prayer** is an act of **listening** to God’s words and inspirations. It is a case of conversing from the heart to the heart, and **an anthem of praise**, gratitude, glory, **repentance and invocation**.

10. Prayer is a conscientious presence before God, even, Pope Francis says, it is **entering through the door** that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, opened between heaven and earth, through his incarnation and his life on earth, through his death and resurrection. In the time of Holy Lent, which is “the time of acceptance and the time of graces” (2 Corinthians 6: 2), the Church appears like the hand holding this gate, to keep it open, by proclaiming the Word of God, celebrating the Sacraments and distributing its graces, and witnessing faith that gains its effectiveness by the acts of love (Galatians 5: 6). On the other hand, the world seeks to withdraw into itself and close that door through which God comes into the world, and wants the world to come to Him, and live. Hence, the world is trying to repel the hand of the Church injure it, or crush it⁷. However, the Church is always in a state of “**hunger and thirst after righteousness**” (Matthew 5: 6) namely to the good and salvation of the world. Were not Jesus Christ’s last words on the cross: “I am thirsty” (John 19: 28) a reflection of his thirst so that love and forgiveness reign in the world, in order to receive the fruits of redemption?

⁵ Catechism, 1434.

⁶ Same reference, 2559.

⁷ Pope Francis’ message for Lent 2015.

Almsgiving

(Refer to Matthew 6: 1-4)

11. Almsgiving, which is the work of love and compassion, constitutes the third component of the time of Great Lent, after fasting and praying. These three are the new law of the Bible, the actions of the virtue of religion⁸, and they make of Great Lent a time of regeneration for believers and the Church, because they are ways to gain forgiveness from sins through repentance and reconciliation with one's brothers/sisters, the interest in their salvation⁹, and to live the social love for "Jesus' least of his brothers": who are the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner (Matthew 25: 31-46). We express our love through financial, spiritual, cultural, moral, economical and social support.

Actually, in its official teaching, the Church calls upon her sons and daughters to make acts of love and mercy to help those with **physical needs** by feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and meeting them in their **spiritual needs** such as education, condolence, encouragement, remission, reconciliation and enduring patiently¹⁰.

We appreciate our ecclesial, educational, medical, social, and charitable institutions that are dedicated in fulfilling these needs, in addition to the pastoral work, and similar public and private institutions. We also appreciate the initiatives of individuals, pastoral groups and apostolic organizations that help in this way. By all means, we should increase our efforts to preserve our Christian people in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Palestine and the Holy Lands to contribute in the growth of the homelands based on cultural, economical, and developmental values.

We express our gratitude to the sons of our Churches and our homelands spread throughout the world for the help they are giving, generously, for their hometowns, their countries and their people.

12. In his message for Lent, **His Holiness Pope Francis calls upon us to get out of the status of selfishness and indifference** facing these physical and spiritual needs that are increasing, as the situation is becoming global. There is no way to get out of it except by getting filled by the love of God that the Church conveys to us by proclaiming the word of the Bible, so we listen to it carefully, and by the Sacraments, and accepting this grace, especially the Eucharist.

Pope Francis reminds us of three calls:

The first from St. Paul the apostle: "**If one member suffers, all suffer together**" (1 Corinthians 12: 6). It is the mystery of the Church- the unity, the body of Christ, one

⁸ Catechism, 1969.

⁹ Same reference, 1434.

¹⁰ Same reference, 2447.

but with different members, in which we live a reality interlinked with human feelings.

The second, from the word of God to Cain in the book of Genesis: **“Where is your brother?”** (Genesis 4: 9). It is a call to preserve the bond of fraternity among all people with responsibility and solidarity.

The third, from St. James the Apostle: **“Make your hearts firm”** (James 5:8). It is a call to overcome the experience of indifference, and to form a merciful, strong and steadfast heart, a heart not set on its own self importance but, rather devoted to others in their needs.

13. Beloved brothers and sisters, you all know **the increasing needs of our people in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and the Holy Land**, because of wars, destruction and displacement, emigration and impoverishment, because of the growing economic and livelihood crisis, unemployment and limited job opportunities. They must be addressed together and forces must unite in living social love.

Caritas Lebanon, the Church’s official social, humanitarian and developmental institution, will carry out the **Annual Lent Campaign** in parishes, schools, universities and institutions, for contributions, collections and donations. **They are all geared to meet these needs.**

We invite you to apply the generosity of love in a spirit of solidarity, interdependence and cooperation, without forgetting that “the bounties of the earth are intended from the Creator for all people”, and that “the individual property for the bounties of the earth are characterized by social restraint” in order to share it with the disadvantaged and needy.

Conclusion

14. At the end of this message, we wish all of you a blessed Lent, during which we renew together our relationship with God and ourselves through prayer and internal repentance, and we amend the fraternal relationship with those to whom we are in a disagreement, through forgiveness and reconciliation, and with “Jesus’ least of his brothers” by acts of love and mercy.

We ask Christ the Redeemer to strengthen in us, the “**hunger and thirst after righteousness**” (Matthew 5: 6).

With my endless prayers and love.

From Bkerke, on the feast of our father, St. Maron, February 9, 2015.

Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

Signed and Sealed

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