

### **The First Sunday, Triumph of Orthodoxy**

Each Sunday in Great Fast has two themes, two meanings. There is the original theme around which the week was dedicated, and then each Sunday developed a second theme which came into prominence later. However, remnants from the original commemoration remain. The dominant theme of First Sunday since 842 A.D. is the victory of the use of holy images (icons), in the Church. In that year the iconoclastic controversy, which had raged on and off since 726, was finally laid to rest, and icons and their veneration were restored. Ever since, this Sunday has been commemorated as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy." The connection of this celebration with Great Fast is purely historical: The first "Triumph of Orthodoxy" took place on this particular Sunday.

### **The Second Sunday in which St. Gregory Palamas is Commemorated**

On the Second Sunday of the Fast, the Orthodox Church commemorates our Holy Father Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica. The vindication of his teachings by the Church in the 14th Century was acclaimed as a second triumph of Orthodoxy. Historically the Great Fast was a period wherein the catechumens were preparing for Baptism, Holy Illumination. Accordingly, the scripture readings point to the Paschal mystery of Baptism: The entrance into the new life inaugurated by Christ. To the catechumen, this new life is only announced and promised, and he accepts it by faith. Those who believe in Christ, who want to be baptized, who are preparing yourselves for Pascha, shall see the inauguration of the new age. But it is only seen when one believes and repents.



### **The Third Sunday in which the Precious and Holy Cross is Venerated**

The Third Sunday marks the halfway point of the Great Fast. A special veneration of the Cross, which prepares the faithful for the commemoration of the Crucifixion during Holy Week takes place to encourage us to continue with the demands of the Great Fast. The Gospel Reading reminds us, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36)

### **The Fourth Sunday in which St. John Climacos is Commemorated**

On March 30 and on the Fourth Sunday of Holy Great Fast the Orthodox Church commemorates our Righteous Father John, the author of the great spiritual work "The Ladder of Divine Ascent." His life and writings affirm him as a supreme bearer and proponent of Christian asceticism. The ascetic example of this great Saint of the Church inspires us in our Great Fast efforts. The lessons of this Sunday begin to reveal to us the meaning of Christ's *sacrifice* by which we are given access "into the inner shrine behind the curtain," i.e., into the holy of holies of God's Kingdom. It also announced for the first time the voluntary Passion of Christ and His Resurrection



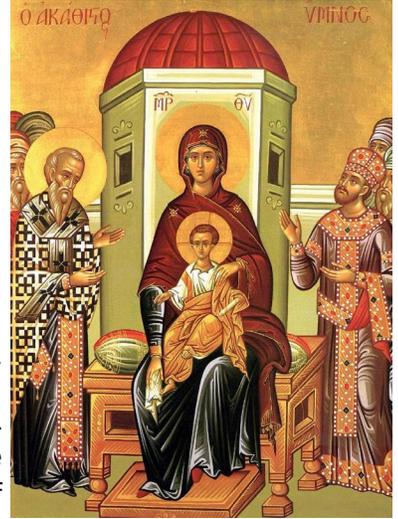
### **The Fifth Thursday in which The Great Canon is chanted**

The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete can best be described as a penitential lamentation conveying to us the scope and depth of sin, shaking the soul with despair, repentance, and hope. St. Andrew interweaves the great biblical themes with confession of sin and repentance. The events

of sacred history are revealed as events of *my* life. God's past actions are aimed at *me* and *my* salvation. The tragedy of sin and betrayal as *my* personal tragedy. My life is shown to me as part of the great and all-embracing fight between God and the powers of darkness which rebel against Him.

### **The Fifth Saturday which we chant the Akathistos Hymn**

The Akathist Hymn is a profound, devotional poem, which chants the praises of the Holy Birthgiver-of-God and Ever-Virgin Mary. It is one of the most beloved services in the Orthodox Church composed in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. The Akathist Hymn has proven so popular in the liturgical life of the Church that many other hymns have been written following its format. These include Akathists to Our Lord Jesus Christ, to the Cross, and to many Saints.



### **The Fifth Sunday in which Our Venerable Mother St. Mary of Egypt is Commemorated**

Our Venerable Mother Mary was born in Egypt. She lived a life of debauchery and sinfulness. When she was miraculously barred from entering the Church of the Holy Resurrection in Jerusalem, she repented of her sins and went to live in the desert for 48 years. She was discovered by St. Zosimas to whom she related her story. She begged him to return the next year and he found her there dead on that very spot. Zosimas buried the body of the wonderful saint, Mary of Egypt. When he returned to the monastery, he recounted the whole story of her life and the wonders to which he had been an eyewitness. Thus, the Lord glorifies repentant sinners. She entered into rest in about the year 530. St. Mary is remembered as we enter the final week of the Great Fast to arouse the energy of the sluggish and to urge sinners to repentance, imitating her example.

The Great Fast ends on the Sixth Friday of the Great Fast, the day before we commemorate the Raising of Lazarus from the Dead. "We have completed the forty days that profit our souls. Let us sing: "Rejoice, city of Bethany, home of Lazarus! Rejoice, Mary and Martha, his sisters! Tomorrow Christ will come and raise your dead brother to life. Bitter and unsatisfied, hell will hear His voice. Shaking and groaning, it will release bound Lazarus. The assembly of Hebrews will be amazed. They will greet Him with palms and branches. Though their priests and elders look on Him with envy and malice, the children shall praise Him in song: 'Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord, the King of Israel!'"