

Great Fast

Intergenerational Learning Program

Session Focus St. Basil asks us “to recall that fasting is very old and that all the saints observed it as though it were an inheritance from parents, transmitted from father to son. Thus did this treasure come down to us as an unbroken tradition” (On Fasting I). This session on the Great Fast focuses on this tradition that asks us to repent and forgive as we prepare to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ. Through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, we will learn to put God first in all that we do. Also, as Church family we will come together often to pray and encourage each other as we follow this “unbroken tradition” on our journey to Pascha.

Learning Objectives

This session on the Great Fast guides learners of all ages to

- identify the Great Fast as the 40-day preparation for Pascha, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (know-what)
- recognize that our Church gives us many prayers and services that help us learn to forgive and repent. (know-why)
- practice praying, fasting, and almsgiving as a way of putting Christ first in all that we do. (know-how)

Background Readings

Aslanoff, Catherine. *The Incarnate God*. (Volume II). Crestwood: St. Valdimir’s Seminary Press, 1995.

Come Bless the Lord Icon Packet. God With Us Catechetical Series, 1976.

Forest, Jim. *Praying with Icons*. New York: Orbis Books, 1997.

Hear Me, O Lord. compiled by Rev. Demetrius E. Wysochansky, OSBM. New York: Basilian Fathers, 2001.

Journey Through the Great Fast, Daily Meditations and Reflection Questions. Office of Religious Education, Archeparchy of Pittsburgh. Fairfax: Eastern Christian Publications, 2001.

Katrij, Julian J., OSBM. *A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year*. Translated by Fr. Demetrius E. Wysochansky, OSBM. New York: Basilian Fathers Publication, 1983.

The New American Bible, Saint Joseph Edition. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992. (All quoted Scripture is taken from this Bible.)

Session Resources

Before the Session

Environment

- Set up 4 different icon stands at each of the sections used for the in-depth learning experience. The opening activity for Part 3 asks the participants to arrange the icon corner. The icon of the Crucifixion can be found in the *Come Bless the Lord* icon packet.

Home Kit Materials

Children

1. Great Fast Prayers and Practices Handout
2. Icon of the Crucifixion
3. Ladder of Divine Ascent Handout
4. Twenty stickers to place on the ladder each time the child does something for Jesus (praying, fasting, and/or sharing).
5. Two sheets of white construction paper on which the child is to draw himself or herself doing something good and nice for someone. They will share these pictures at the next session.

Middle School Youth

1. Great Fast Prayers and Practices Handout
2. Icon of the Crucifixion
3. Ladder of Divine Ascent Handout
4. Twenty stickers to place on the ladder each time you did something for Jesus. Add a brief description of what you did.
5. Two sheets of white construction paper. Find articles in the newspaper about teenagers who are in trouble (examples are fighting in school, shoplifting). Paste the articles onto the construction paper and write a prayer for these young people to return to following Jesus in everything they do.

High School Youth

1. Great Fast Prayers and Practices Handout
2. Icon of the Crucifixion
3. Ladder of Divine Ascent Handout
4. Choose as many activities (handout #4) as possible that you will try to practice to help you focus on Jesus Christ throughout the Great Fast. Write them on the ladder in the order that you think will get you closer to Jesus.
5. Choose as many activities (handout #4) as possible that you will try to practice to help you focus on Jesus Christ throughout the Great Fast. Write them on the ladder in the order that you think will get you closer to Jesus.

6. In a journal at the end of each day, write one activity you did that brought you closer to Jesus. Also, write one choice you made that reflected you are observing the Great Fast.
7. Highlight 2 facts about the Resurrection Icon (handout #5). Be prepared to share those facts at the beginning of the next session.

Adult

1. Great Fast Prayers and Practices Handout
2. Icon of the Crucifixion
3. Ladder of Divine Ascent Handout
4. Choose as many activities (handout #4) as possible that you will try to practice to help you focus on Jesus Christ throughout the Great Fast. Write them on the ladder in the order that you think will get you closer to Jesus.
5. Choose one Book of the Bible that you will read from every day for at least a few minutes. In a journal write a word or group of words on which you will meditate throughout the day. At the end of the day, reflect on how this word helped your grow closer to the Lord and to other people.
6. Read the Background Handouts and highlight at least five facts to share at the next session. Write or prepare a brief sermon that explains your understanding of some aspect of the Great Fast. These sermons will be presented at the beginning of the next session so they should not be more than 3-4 minutes.

Prayer Resources

Readings

First Sunday of the Great Fast (Commemoration of Holy Images)

Epistle – Heb 11:24-40 and Gospel – Jn 1:43-51

Second Sunday of the Great Fast (Sunday of the Palsied Man)

Epistle – Heb 1:10-14; 2:1-3 and Gospel – Mk 2:1-12

Third Sunday of the Great Fast (Veneration of the Holy Cross)

Epistle – Heb 4:14-16; 5:1-6 and Gospel – Mk 8:34-38; 9:1

Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast (Commemoration of St. John Climacus)

Epistle – Heb 6:13-20 and Gospel – Mk 9:17-31

Fifth Sunday of the Great Fast (Commemoration of Mary of Egypt)

Epistle – Heb 9:11-14 and Gospel – Mk 10:32-45

Handouts Preparation

- Handout #1: Sundays of the Great Fast
- Handout #2: My Ladder of Divine Ascent
- Handout #3: Suggested Activities during the Great Fast
- Handout #4: Great Fast Prayers and Practices
- Handout #5: Explanation of the Crucifixion
- Handout #6: Background Information

Online Sources

<http://www.silk.net/RelEd/>

<http://4CatholicEducators.com>

<http://www.antiochian.org>

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering (20 minutes)

1. Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Provide name tags or invite people to make their own.
- Distribute the Home Kit for the session, including any handouts participants will need for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the In-depth Learning program at the beginning of the activity.)
- Invite people to share a meal; depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal instead.

2. Group Formation

Organize people into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people for the All Ages Learning Experience. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational – children, teens, parents, and grandparents – keep them together in one group.

For the In-depth Learning Experience (Part 3) organize the participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, two groups of adolescents (middle school and high school), and groups of adults.

3. Introduction

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session, using the words below or your own words.

The kontakion for the Sunday of the Pharisee and Publican proclaims the purpose of the Great Fast: *“Let us bring to the Lord the sighs of the Publican, and as sinners let us approach the Lord, for He desires the salvation of all. He grants forgiveness to all who repent.”* When we sing these words, we are reminded of what the Lord wants us to do in order to be with Him forever: He wants us to recognize our sins and repent so that we can have eternal life. In this session we will learn from the stories in the New Testament how we are to forgive and repent. Also, we will recognize the many opportunities our Church gives us to grow closer to Jesus Christ as we wait for Pascha.

4. Opening Prayer Service

In church, pray either the Forgiveness Service or Akathist to Our Suffering Lord.

Part 2. All Ages Opening Learning Experience (20 minutes)

Our Metanoia

Purpose

To recognize that the Great Fast is the time period the Church gives to help us return to God. Through our metanoia, Greek for conversion, we retrace our steps to our baptism when we “put on Christ.”

Materials

- A ladder – preferably with 5 or 6 steps
- Printout of the Sundays of the Great Fast
- Scissors and masking tape
- CD or tape player
- CD or tape that includes Great Fast hymns (One suggestion: *The Passion & Resurrection of Christ, Lenten & Easter Byzantine Hymns in Slavonic & English*, Holy Ghost Byzantine Catholic Church Choir, 2310 S. 24th St., Philadelphia, PA 19145-3207)

Environment

- Play the music
- Set up the ladder in the middle of the hall
- Place the chairs in a semi-circle around the ladder (Everyone should see the front rungs of the ladder.)
- Have one volunteer to climb the ladder and one volunteer to help from each age group

Introduction

Start by asking: How many of you would want to climb this ladder? Why or why not?

Does it help to have someone else present when you climb a ladder? Why?

The Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast commemorates a Saint who compares our growing closer to Jesus Christ as climbing a ladder. St. John Climacus wrote a book called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* in which he discusses ways we can grow closer to Christ by climbing a great spiritual ladder. With each rung we learn to practice the virtues that draw us closer to God’s love. Our Church teaches us that we are to spend our lives seeking our divinization, which means that we are to become Christlike and united to Him forever.

Today let’s imagine this ladder in front of us as our own personal Ladder of Divine Ascent. Let’s have our volunteers take turns climbing the ladder. As they climb, notice what happens and what changes as they grow closer to the top. (Some might become more anxious and afraid; some might show signs of victory at the top; some might just want to get down quickly.) Ask: What would you have wanted to do if someone started falling? (We’d want to help.) We can think of our climbing this ladder as our way to grow closer to God’s love, but first we have to be committed to reach the top. What else helps us reach the top? (Stay focused, look ahead, avoid distractions, offer and accept help.) This ladder is one way to think about our journey through the Great Fast. The Church asks us to stay focused on Jesus Christ as we wait for His

Resurrection that conquered death and granted life. We are to meditate on how much God loves us. Throughout the Great Fast, we are to remember that "In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us" (1 Jn 4:9-12). During the Great Fast we take time in our lives to learn how to love God and love each other.

Now we are going to add the names of the Sundays of the Great Fast to the rungs of the ladder. Our Church uses each Sunday to help us focus on ways we can join with all past generations who followed the Great Fast as a time of preparation for Pascha. St. Basil tells us *"that fasting is very old and that all the saints observed it as though it were an inheritance from parents, transmitted from father to son. Thus did this treasure come down to us as an unbroken tradition"* (On Fasting I). Our Church asks us each Sunday during the Great Fast to recall the treasure of our Church history and tradition.

Let's add the names to the rungs:

- First Sunday of the Great Fast (Commemoration of Holy Images)
- Second Sunday of the Great Fast (Sunday of the Palsied Man)
- Third Sunday of the Great Fast (Veneration of the Holy Cross)
- Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast (Commemoration of St. John Climacus)
- Fifth Sunday of the Great Fast (Commemoration of Mary of Egypt)

Now that we have this image of a ladder, we can look to our own lives and think about ways we can make our own personal Ladder of Divine Ascent. Think of the many ways you can become more like Christ just as was promised at your baptism when you "put on Christ." During the Great Fast, our Church asks us to pray, fast, and give alms to help us become more like Christ. Our Eastern Church also gives us beautiful services that have us come together to help each other focus on Jesus. During these services we prostrate during the Great Fast prayers so that with our whole body we are asking for God's forgiveness as we repent of our sins. As you listen to each Sunday's Gospel reading (they are also listed in the Home Kit materials), think about ways you can follow the examples given to help us grow closer to Christ in our words and deeds. During this period of Lent, "it is in the light of the resurrection that we act. . . Then, from the beginning, let us accept the light of Christ to shed light on our inner darkness (Mt 6:23): then our sins will melt away 'as wax melts before the fire' (Ps 67[68]:2)" (*The Incarnate God* 49).

(In the Home Kit Materials are handouts that ask participants to develop their own Ladder of Divine Ascent as they continue on the journey through the Great Fast.)

The following is a sample schedule for the activity plans:

- 6:00 **Part 1:** Gathering, Hospitality, Prayer and Dinner
- 6:45 **Part 2:** All Ages Learning Experience
- 7:05 **Part 3:** Move to In-depth Learning Experiences

Families with Children

- 7:10 Arrange the Icon Corner
- 7:20 Explain the Crucifixion icon and the Prodigal Son icon
- 7:30 Portray the interactive story of Jesus with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)
- 7:50 Pray near the icon corner
- 8:05 Make a holy cross
- 8:25 Sing "Lord have mercy"

Middle School

- 7:10 Arrange the Icon Corner
- 7:20 Explain the Crucifixion Icon and the Prodigal Son Icon
- 7:30 Read Lk 15:11-32 and use interactive dynamics and open-ended questions
- 7:50 Pray
- 8:05 Make a cream cheese or butter cross
- 8:25 Sing "Having Suffered"

High School

- 7:10 Arrange the Icon Corner
- 7:20 Explain the Crucifixion Icon and the Icon of the Publican and Pharisee
- 7:30 Read Lk 18:10-14 and use interactive dynamics and open-ended questions
- 7:45 Pray
- 7:55 Write in journals
- 8:05 Decorate a cross
- 8:25 Sing "Having Suffered"

Adults

- 7:10 Arrange the Icon Corner
 - 7:20 Sing "Having Suffered"
 - 7:25 Meditate on Crucifixion Icon
 - 7:40 Read Mk 6:14-21 and use reflective activities
 - 7:55 Choose a symbolic remembrance for the Great Fast
 - 8:25 Sing "To Your Holy Cross"
- 8:30 **Part 3:** Presenting the Home Activities (small group sharing)
 - 8:50 **Part 4:** Closing Prayer

Part 3. In-depth Learning Experiences (80 minutes)

This format provides for four separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. Be sure to review the activity to prepare for the session and gather the materials that you will need to use

Organize participants into four parallel learning groups:

- families with children (grades 1-5)
- middle school (grades 6-8)
- high school (grades 9-12)
- young adults and adults (with two discussion groups: 18-39 year olds; 40+ years old)

Activity Plan: Families with Children (Grades 1-5)

Sunday of Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10): Our Desire and God's Greater Desire

- Jesus seeks us out.
- Jesus accepts and forgives us even before we ask.
- Being forgiven makes one so happy that they want to do whatever they can to make up to others the harm that they did.
- Create a sense of wonder, anticipation, excitement, surprise, gratitude, good will and initiative, generosity of heart, kindness, acceptance, understanding, patience, etc. Bring the "story" to life for the children.

Plan

1. While playing Lenten music, invite the children to help you set-up the Festal Icon Corner with:
 - Two decorative cloths - rushnyks
 - Icon of Crucifixion, Jesus with two thieves
 - Icon of Jesus with Zacchaeus
 - Two candles. Let children light them.
 - Bowl of Holy Water
2. Explain/discuss the Crucifixion Icon.
3. Explain/discuss the Prodigal Son Icon:
 - Name of the Icon, who is in it
 - Interactive story reading of Luke 19:1-10

4. Adapt the account of Jesus with Zacchaeus into an interactive story, in which the children appropriately:
 - Make movements
 - Make sounds
 - Repeat key words, names and phrases
 - Interact with you, the storyteller, with some guided discussion.
 - What town? What country? What were these people called?
 - What was about to happen? What was the latest news? Who was coming? (Jesus is coming!)
 - How did the people feel? (excited, curious, eager...)
 - Who was Zacchaeus? What did he look like? What kind of a job did he have? How did the other Jews think about and feel about him? How did they treat him?
 - There were so many people crowded together, what did Zacchaeus do? Why?
 - How did Jesus surprise Zacchaeus? What did He say to Zacchaeus?
 - Did Zacchaeus listen to Jesus? How did he do what Jesus wanted? Did the people like it that Jesus was eating dinner at Zacchaeus' house? Why? What did they call Zacchaeus? (a sinner)
 - How do you think Zacchaeus felt? What did he promise to do?
 - How do you imagine that Zacchaeus behaved, worked and lived after being so loved, accepted and forgiven by Jesus?
 - When and how do we experience Jesus forgiving us?
 - Which thief was like Zacchaeus, by: wanting to be with Jesus; being sorry for his sins and asking for Jesus' help and; wanting to spread God's goodness by becoming better, ie. "Master, remember me when You come into Your kingdom/heaven?"
 - Should we think about other the Jesus did or how the other people did? How should we think about others...feel about them...treat them?
 - Is there anyone you know whom others do not like? Lead into a guided discussion.
 - How ought we to think, feel about the Holy Mystery of Penance? Why? Who do we see? Who do we really meet? How do we receive the Holy Mystery of Penance?

5. Gather the children near the Icon Corner for prayer.
 - Introduce, teach as needed, the "Sign of the Cross" with Holy Water. Explain and discuss the power of the Sign of the Cross and Holy Water.
 - Pause and guide (with age appropriate examples) the children, to remember how:
 - They sinned by not being, thinking and acting like Jesus
 - Jesus would like them to be, think and act at home, playground, school, church, etc.
 - Now imagine yourselves to be like Zacchaeus who is sorry for his sins, wants to be good and is so happy that Jesus loves him, forgives him and blesses him to start all over again.

- Teach and then sing the Moleben melody of “Lord, have mercy!” (3 times) with a sense of
 - Happy confidence that Jesus will always meet them with love, acceptance and mercy/compassion
 - Sorrow, contrition for how they sinned and were not as good as they could have been
 - Love, understanding, acceptance of others, because each one of us is a sinner whom God loves and wants to help be holy and happy with God the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Mary, the Mother of God, all the angels, saints and everyone in the whole wide world.
- Teach our traditional “Holy Kiss of Love and Forgiveness.” Children go to one another. Each:
 - Asks, “Please forgive me.”
 - Answers, “I do forgive you!”
 - Then they appropriately give each other our traditional “Holy Kiss.”

(At this point, you might want to take the opportunity to teach the children the formula used at forgiveness vespers : they, (two by two) stand facing each other, cross themselves, and make a poklon towards each other. One says “forgive me, my brother/sister and pray for me .” The other responds: “God forgives! Forgive me and pray for me. “ Then they give each other the “holy kiss” three times on the cheek. This is repeated until each person has had an opportunity to face all others in the group. Then they could stand in front of the icon and recite the prayer of St. Ephrem , with poklony, as prescribed.)

- Form a semi-circle in front to the icon. Hold hands (those on the end hold an upward hand to Jesus in the icon) and all pray (recite or sing) the “Our Father.”
 - Pray the “Glory Be.”
6. Application Activities (options):
- Play appropriate religious background music during the activity session.
 - Let the children dress-up and act-out the episode of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10
 - Color an icon of Jesus meeting Zacchaeus
 - Draw a picture of Zacchaeus’ face ... or the scenes:
 - Before Zacchaeus met Jesus
 - When Jesus said that He wanted to eat dinner at Zaccheus’s house
 - After Zacchaeus experienced Jesus’ forgiving love.
7. Make a Holy Cross out of either:
- Colored clay, glued to large paper plate that the children decorate and/or color.
 - Clothes pins or popsicle sticks (have the cardboard crosses already cut-out and the clothes pins already taken apart). Children could also paint these crosses.
8. End by singing the “Lord have mercy” which was sung during the Prayer Service.

Activity Plan: Middle School

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32): Repentance and Forgiveness

- Jesus always welcomes us when we are sorry for our sins and want to be more good and holy.
- How to be so full of God's love that one can: overcome feeling hurt; can readily forgive with joyful love; can help the forgiven start anew in their life. *"To err is human, but to love is Divine!"*
- Types or degrees of love:
 - Unconditional
 - Conditional
 - Denied (withheld or rejecting).
- Identify and experience attitudes/dispositions
 - Happy, generous love when all is well
 - Sad, patient and prayerful love while waiting for someone to come back, after realizing that what they did was sinful (hurtful, selfish, disrespectful, rude, lazy, mean, etc.)
 - Arrogance and insensitivity towards others
 - Jealousy
 - Doing good only with a sense of duty and not of love
 - Being judgmental, narrow minded, resentful, begrudging.
- Use of what we have and of our talents
- Types of home (home could also mean, where one is living)
 - Life destroying
 - Life stagnating
 - Life enhancing.
- Create felt-senses of the various dynamics of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Bring the story to life for the children.

Plan

1. Arrange the Icon Corner: same as for the Early Elementary Group.
2. Icon Explanations/Discussions: similar to the Early Elementary Group.
3. Talk briefly about the "story" of the Icon of the Crucifixion.
4. Talk about the story of the Icon of the Prodigal Son.
5. Read Luke 15:11-32, with interactive dynamics and open ended questions, similar to the Early Elementary Group.
 - Focus on the three main characters (Father, youngest son, oldest son)
 - *Youngest Son* grows up (like a boy into a teenager or young man) ...types of love
 - What does he want to do? What does he ask for? What do you think about this? (selfish, greedy, lazy-easy money, disrespectful-usually inheritance is received after the father dies). How does he believe his father's love to be?
 - What did his father give him? (ring was like a credit card worth X-amount of money...in a certain sense the younger son instantly became like a millionaire)

- How do you think the father thought and felt about the youngest son wanting his inheritance now? ...about his son's leaving (taking-off and disappearing) from home?
 - Where does the younger son go? What does he do?
 - What do you think about how he used wealth of money? Was he responsible, wise, etc.? Did he use it to help better the lives of others?
 - How did the younger son change when he had no money? Discuss how misfortunate can help us to mature and come closer to God.
 - How did he need forgiveness? Which thief was he like? Why?
 - What does the father do while his son is away? What else do you think he did? (ask around about his son, pray for him, hope that his son returns, want his son to be truly happy and have everything that he needs, etc.)
 - *Oldest Son* also grows-up ...types of love
 - Where does he choose to live? What does he do? What do you think were his good qualities? How does he believe his father's love to be?
 - How do you think his father thought and felt about him?
 - What does the oldest son do when his "disgraceful" brother comes back home?
 - Now, what kind of qualities does the oldest son have? (jealous, dutiful without much love, mercenary, narrow minded judgmental, unforgiving-holding a grudge, self-pity, etc.)
 - How is it easy for good Christians to be like the oldest son, if they are not careful?
 - How did he need forgiveness? Which thief is he like? Why?
 - *The Father* loves ...type of love
 - Where and how did the father live? To which class of society did belong? How did he earn his livelihood?
 - How did he share his wealth/goodness with his: oldest son?...youngest son?... employees?
 - Levels of expression of the father's love:
 - (1) Essentials: How was it the same for everyone?
 - (2) Accidentals: Yet how was it different for different people and circumstances?
 - (3) Discuss how we need to accept that others may have different needs than ours, and that we are to accept these differences. For example what another brother, sister, relative, friend, student or neighbor needs in comparison to what I need (not to be confused with to "what I want").
 - How does God want us to be like the
 - Father?
 - Youngest son?
 - Oldest son?
 - How would you match the people in the Parable of the Prodigal Son with the ones in the Icon of the Crucifixion? Why?
6. Gather the teens near the Icon Corner
- Pray the "Sign of the Cross" with Holy Water -
 - Review and discuss the power of the Sign of the Cross and Holy water.
 - Pause and guide (with age appropriate examples) the children, to remember how:
 - They sinned by not being, thinking and acting like Jesus

- Jesus would like them to think and act at home, playground, school, church, etc.
- And now like the repentant Prodigal Son, they are sorry and want to be more loving and good.
- Sing three times with profound bows: “Having suffered...”
- Review our traditional “Holy Kiss of Love and Forgiveness”
 - Teens go to one another. Each:
 - (1) Asks, “Please forgive me.”
 - (2) Answers, “I do forgive you!”
 - (3) Then they appropriately give each other our traditional “Holy Kiss.”

(At this point, you might want to take the opportunity to teach the children the formula used at forgiveness vespers : they, (two by two) stand facing each other, cross themselves, and make a poklon towards each other. One says “forgive me, my brother/sister and pray for me .” The other responds: “God forgives! Forgive me and pray for me. “ Then they give each other the “holy kiss” three times on the cheek. This is repeated until each person has had an opportunity to face all others in the group. Then they could stand in front of the icon and recite the prayer of St. Ephrem , with poklony, as prescribed.)

- Form a semi-circle in front to the icon. Hold hands (those on the end hold an upward hand to Jesus in the icon) and all pray (recite or sing) the “Our Father.”
- Pray the “Glory Be.”

7. Application Activity (options)

- Play appropriate religious background music during the activity session.
- Children dress-up and act-out the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).
- Make a mural or collage: Each child or group of children draws a scene from the parable. Then put their pictures together in a way that they can be separated at a later time.
- On a small disposable plate, make a cream cheese (1 box package) or butter cross (2 quarter sticks); decorate it with swirls as from a toothpick or fork; quartered red maraschino cherries to make a cross-flower where the cross intersects; cloves for the crown of thorns; add a few drops of green food coloring to shredded coconut to make grass and sprinkle it around the cross; wrap the plate in plastic wrap. Each child takes his or her cross home for the Easter Food Blessing on Holy Saturday (it could be frozen until then).

8. End by singing, “Having suffered...” as from their Prayer Service.

Activity Plan: High School

Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:10-14): Humility and God’s Pleased Response

- Humility is a wholesome sense of:
 - How God’s blessings and goodness are manifested in oneself through virtues, notable attributes, talents, skills, accomplishments, etc
 - How one needs more of God’s blessing and goodness, due to one’s shortcomings, none deliberate sinful tendencies and deliberate sinfulness
 - Love of self both as a redeemed sinner

- Love of others also as redeemed sinners.
- Humility is experiencing realizing that each one of us:
 - Is a beloved son or daughter of God
 - Of him/herself is nothing and can do nothing, but with God's grace he/she can do all (that is good.)
 - 'Can do all things through Christ who strengthens him/her.' (St. Paul, Phil.4:13, adapted)
- Humility is:
 - Rejoicing in God's goodness both in oneself and others and all of creation
 - Confidence in God's mercy, i.e. God's compassionate and healing love
- The more mature a person is spiritually and psychologically, the more truly humble he or she is.
- A humble person has the inner love, strength and integrity to:
 - Acknowledge the attributes that God has loved into him/her
 - Acknowledge the attributes that God has loved into others
 - Acknowledge his/her limitations and sinfulness
 - Accept the consequences of one's thoughts and behaviors
 - Seek ways to rectify any wrong that one has done
 - Strive to be more wholesome and holy
 - Be compassionate both to oneself and to others
 - To apologize
 - To accept an apology.
- A humble person can experience awareness of, acknowledgement of and repentance of their sin – as a blessing in disguise – because then he/she:
 - Embraced and imbued by our loving and redeeming God
 - Seeks the opposite of their sin, temptation or shortcoming: Which is God's grace, God's blessings, God's life, God's gift waiting to be accepted.
- Jesus came to save sinners. So, "seize the moment" to
 - Be forgiven, and thus imitate Christ and....
 - Be forgiving.
- Forgiveness involves personal healing and growth, leading to wisdom fuller discipleship.
- Pride is the opposite of humility. How would you describe it?

Plan

1. Arrange the Icon Corner: similar as for the Early Elementary Group.
2. Review discussion of the Icon of the Crucifixion.
3. Review discussion of the Icon of the Pharisee and Publican.
4. Read Luke 18:10-14 aloud in small groups of: first narrator; Jesus; Pharisee; Publican/Tax Collector. Prepare them so that they can read their sections with meaningful affect, voice inflection and appropriate gestures, as of the Pharisee and the Publican.
5. Guided Discussion
 - Love in the forms of humility, repentance, forgiveness – or the absence of such love

- The qualities of and one's assessment of the humility of The Pharisee, The Publican, and Christ.
 - Attributes of humility, as in the preliminary considerations.
 - How each one of us is a combination of the Pharisee, Publican and, yes, Christ.
 - How one can share in the repentant stance of the Publican
 - How one can be Christlike for someone who has behaved in the fashion of the Publican and Pharisee
 - How receiving the Holy Mystery of Penance/Reconciliation is a "primetime Publican opportunity."
 - The connections between the characters and mysteries of the Icon of the Pharisee and Publican and of the Icon of the Crucifixion.
6. Prayer service similar as for the Upper Elementary Group, except:
- Chant the Prayer of Saint Ephrem as in the Divine Office, with prescribed bows
 - Holy Kiss of Forgiveness: do not force any gesture of the Holy Kiss, for those who may be uncomfortable with it at this time
 - Pray the Our Father in the prayer posture of the Publican, as each one chooses.
7. Application Activities (options) Perhaps play soft reflective instrumental music. Lead them into a time of quiet personal reflection and journaling for any of these: (*Provide paper, pen and envelope for their journal project.*)
- How have I regarded and experienced the Holy Mystery of Penance so far in my life? ... How is Christ inviting me to be more like the humble repentant Publican in my partaking of the Holy Mystery of Penance?
 - How am I like the Pharisee? How am I like the Publican? ... How is Christ towards me as a Pharisee? How is Christ towards me as a Publican?
 - Who are the "Pharisees" and "Publicans" in my life? ...How? ...How would Jesus like me to be towards each of them?
 - If feasible, they could share some of their journal thoughts in groups of 2 or 3, and then possibly in the whole group.
8. *Before the GOF Parish Day, ask the teens to bring a cross*, so that they could decorate it with silk flowers and fern and wire, a plain square red or purple cloth that each could make a design by cutting out white or yellow felt cross and/or border...Then arrange their crosses and sing "To Your Cross..." with profound bows.
9. End with the hymn "Having suffered..." 3 times with profound bows.

Activity Plan: Adults

Matthew 6:14-21: Repentance – Forgiveness and Reconciliation

1. Arrange the Icon Corner: similar as for the Early Elementary Group, except only one icon, that of the Icon of the Crucifixion, and one candle.

2. Sing "Having Suffered.." 3 times with profound bows as physically appropriate for each individual

3. Icon of the Crucifixion:
 - Spend 3-5 minutes gazing upon the, focusing upon the relationships between Christ, the Repentant Thief and the Unrepentant Thief
 - Share insights on these relationships
 - Which thief experiences the essence of the Holy Mystery of Penance/Reconciliation? ...What are the dynamics...from the Repentant Thief...from Christ??
 - Note and discuss the difference between a
 - Healthy guilt of repentance which rejects the sinful act
 - Unhealthy guilt of shame which rejects the personhood of the sinner.
 1. What childhood messages lead to each one? (what you did is... verses you are bad, no good, etc because...)
 2. What makes for healthy, constructive repentance?
 3. What kind of Christlike responsibility do adults have towards children and youth especially -- and others?
 - How does this influence your perceptions of the Holy Mystery of Penance/Reconciliation?
 - Discuss the effects upon oneself, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, interpersonally and physically, when one is either
 - Compassionately and constructively forgiving
 - Unforgiving
 - Righteous, i.e.: feel superior to another

4. Prayer and Fasting in Matthew 6:14-21
 - Each one receives a handout copy of these verses
 - Someone read this aloud reflectively and meaningfully. Spontaneous sharing of one word or brief phrase that most impresses you. It is okay if others choose the same word or brief phrase...allow for pauses.
 - Another reader reads aloud this same passage. Spontaneous brief faith sharing of an insight, i.e., what a person sees, hears or feels Christ saying to him/her.
 - Speak only in the "I" person, because all who listen share in the "I" ... this also promotes ownership of one's personal experience;
 - Say "Amen" when you are finished speaking.
 - Do not comment on another's sharing, nor enter into discussion.
 - The "Our Father." Pray this aloud together

Guided Reconciliation Meditation at the foot of the cross on Calvary

 - Picture or sense yourself with Christ suffering for us on the cross
 - Bring to mind someone you feel that you have hurt, no matter how small
 1. Place that person with you at the foot of the cross...See Christ looking at each of you
 2. Speak with Christ about this offense which you did
 3. Speak with the person involved...what would you like him/her/group to know
 4. Listen to what the offended has to say to you from their perspective at that time

5. While Christ is holding both of you in His embrace from the cross: Hold that person in a prayerful loving gaze...seeing him/her becoming more full of God's love and grace, so as to be bigger/stronger than your offense
6. Imagine yourselves reconciling.
7. Thank Christ for this blessing.
8. Sense the pending victory of Christ's resurrection! ~ pause ~
- Bring to mind someone who has hurt/offended you, no matter how small
 1. See Christ looking lovingly at you and him/her/group
 2. Tell Christ how you think and feel about the offense
 3. Let the offender speak to you from his/her/their perspective at that time
 4. Dialogue with each other
 5. Ask/beg Christ to fill you so much with His merciful love, that in your heart you can release the offender with your forgiveness...."To err is human. To forgive is divine."
 6. Imagine Christ reaching down to embrace you both
 7. Consider how you could make amends with the offended, if possible - if not then at least pray for the offended's inner healing from your offense
 8. Thank Jesus for this blessing
 9. Sense the victory of Christ's resurrection!
 10. Pray the "Our Father" aloud together, once again.

*This exercise may need to be repeated at another time, because the more vulnerable one is - the harder it is to forgive. Sometimes forgiveness comes in degrees or stages in the desire to be forgiving.

5. Concretize your experience of the GOF Day so far, as a symbolic remembrance and reminder throughout the Great Fast. Some suggestions are:
 - If the church grounds are suitable, go for a walk and find something as your symbol
 - Write a journal reflection, prayer or poem, etc.
 - Compose or choose a song or an musical selection
 - Do something artistic, such as a picture; molding clay sculpture; weaving, etc.
 - Gestures or dance.
 - If feasible, share and explain your chosen symbol.
6. End with the hymn "To Your Holy Cross..."

Part 4

Sharing Learning Reflections & Home Application (20 minutes)

1. Whole Group Sharing and Reflection

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each age group to share something they have learned with the entire group. Ask the participants to join intergenerational groups.

Ask each age group to share a project they worked on during the Application Activity part of the session.

Second, present the following information using the words below or your own words:
Today we listened to Gospel readings that taught us how to repent and forgive. Did you recognize any similarities between the way people acted in Jesus' time and the way people act today? Do we still have the Publicans and Pharisees today? Do we still have prodigal children today? Sometimes we think we live in the worst times, but actually the same things were happening when Jesus was here on earth. God sent His Son to show us how to live no matter what century we are in; we have to be willing to follow Jesus Christ's example. No matter how hard it may seem, we need to realize God is with us.

Invite participants to take several minutes for small group sharing.

2. Reflection – Application Strategies

Prepare strategies and activities to guide individuals and families in *reflecting* on the meaning of their learning and their participation in the Church event and in *applying* their learning to daily living. The goal is to help people apply the beliefs and practices to their daily life, and report or “publish” their learning with others in the parish community.

Reflection and application activities and strategies can be included with the Home Kit. You can also include a time for feedback in your next intergenerational learning program

There are a variety of formats for reflection – application activities. Reflection tools include unfinished sentences, reflection questions, learning journals, and a structured reflection activities. Application tools include action plans, practice plans, “to do” lists, and resolutions.

For this lesson, the group can consider an entire parish activity for the Great Fast:

- Collect canned food and clothing weekly to take to a shelter.
- For parishioners who can no longer make their own Pascha basket, arrange the baskets and have them blessed and deliver them on Pascha.
- During the Great Fast service prostrations, kneel in the aisles and actually do the prostrations.
- In the bulletin add recipes that can be used during the Great Fast.
- Organize a fundraiser and send the profit to a seminary or orphanage in Ukraine.
- Arrange a prayer session for the unborn or go to an abortion clinic in the area and pray for one hour.
- Identify one of the Books of the Bible that you plan to read during the Great Fast. Share the title with the entire group, and promise to tell them about that Book at the beginning of the next session. (Publicly stating our intentions can help us keep our promise.)
- Before going to confession, read the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). Meditate on how you are the prodigal son in that story. The following quotation from *The Incarnate God*

(49) will help you understand the comparison: “The sacrament of penance, confession, is offered to us so that we can accomplish the same step as the prodigal son: reconciliation with God and reintegration among our brethren.”

Part 5

Closing Prayer Service (10 minutes)

Lenten Penances and Prostrations:

“In the first centuries of Christianity the practice of public penance for various sins and offenses prevailed in the Church. Following the wishes of the Church, many penitents performed their penance during the Great Fast. Just as the faithful adopted the Forty Days Fast from the catechumens, so too, under the influence of church discipline they began to regard themselves as penitents and to perform various penitential acts during the Great Fast. From this stems the profound penitential spirit of our lenten services.

“Closely connected with our lenten services are inclinations. These inclinations are made either by bowing from the waist or to the ground (the low, profound bow or prostration), and they are performed at all lenten services from Monday through Friday. . . .

“The Kievan Metropolitan George (1073) in his “Rules” for priests and laity prescribes for all the faithful to make three hundred prostrations daily during the Forty Days Fast” (*A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year* 95).

For our closing prayer let us pray the Prayer of St. Ephrem of Syria and do the profound bow if possible. Let us gather around our icon tables so that we have enough room for everyone.

O Lord and Master of my life, drive from me the spirit of discouragement, negligence, ambition and idle talk. (*prostration*)

Grant me, Your servant, the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and charity. (*prostration*)

Yes, my Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not judge others for You are blessed forever and ever. Amen. (*prostration*)

What are you saying with your body when you do a prostration? During this Great Fast, use your entire body to tell Jesus Christ that you are sorry for all your sins, and you are asking Him for forgiveness.

First Sunday of the Great Fast
(Commemoration of Holy Images)

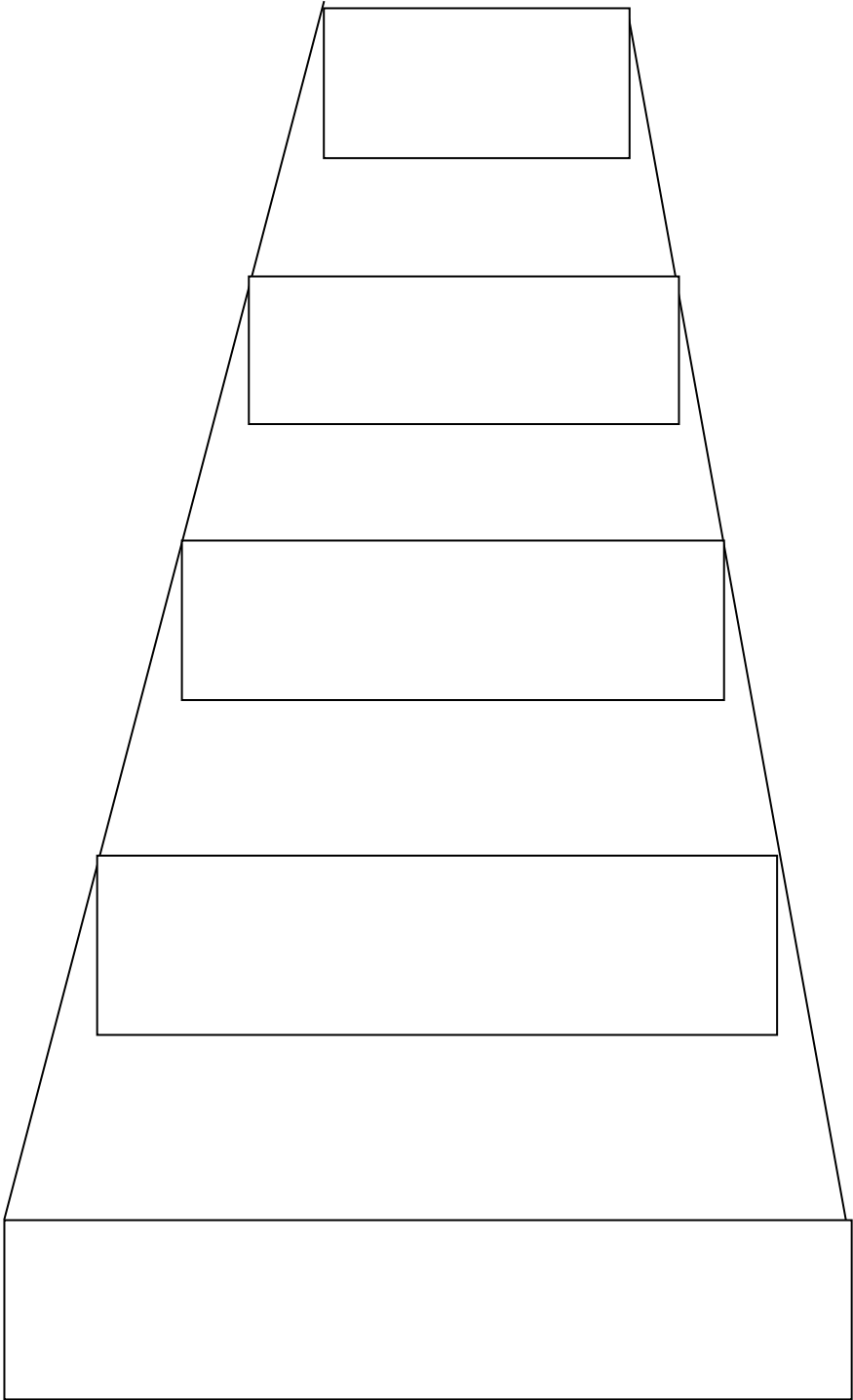
Second Sunday of the Great Fast
(Sunday of the Palsied Man)

Third Sunday of the Great Fast
(Veneration of the Holy Cross)

Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast
(Commemoration of
St. John Climacus)

Fifth Sunday of the Great Fast
(Commemoration of Mary of Egypt)

My Ladder of Divine Ascent



Handout 3: Use the following suggested activities to help you complete your Divine Ladder of Ascent. Choose at least one activity on which to focus each week. Possibly choose one from each category.

Suggested Activities During the Great Fast Forgiveness Received and Given - Repentance “Prayer, Almsgiving, Fasting”

Prayer and Spiritual Growth

At Church and/or Spiritual Center

- Attend and participate in the Parish’s Great Fast Services, as you are able.
- Attend and participate in the Parish’s Retreat Mission.
- Attend and participate in the Parish’s Adult Religious Education or Faith Sharing Sessions.
- Frequent the Holy Mystery of Reconciliation. Go as a family.
- Invite a friend or relative to go to Church with you.

Home, School, Work

- Arrange an Icon Corner for the Great Fast. Include the art projects that were made during the GOF Day. Regularly pray at the Icon Corner, individually and as a family. Take turns leading prayer. Take turns decorating the Corner.
- Reflectively read Holy Scripture and/or other religious literature – could be a bedtime story for children.
- Watch a religious movie, video, dvd or show.
- Listen to religious music.
- Discuss the religious material that you read, watched or listened-to.
- Develop a daily habit for some set time to
 - Meditate upon Our Lord’s life and teaching
 - Forgiveness Exercise Meditation (from adult group on GOF Day, etc.)
 - Pray the Jesus Prayer
 - Practice living in the Presence of God
 - Practice a daily Consciousness Examen (how God has blessed me today; how I was challenged; how I was a faithful son or daughter of God; how I failed in loving and serving God and others – repent, pray for forgiveness, plan to make amends if possible)
 - Sing the hymns of the Great Fast
 - Aim to be accepting, compassionate, nonjudgmental, forgiving and wise.

Almsgiving and Charitable Living

- Give a donation to a charitable or social justice cause, with money that you saved from fasting.

- Volunteer to visit and/or help the sick, homebound, institutionalized, physically or socially challenged ... a Catholic sponsored program or place.
- Have more quality family time together.
- Become more active in helping your parish. Perhaps become an active member of one of your parish's organizations.
- Volunteer to help our modern day outcasts, such as unwed or abortion parents, abused spouses, delinquent youth, the imprisoned, etc.
- Help someone to help him/herself to become a more love-filled and better person.
- Donate your excess food and/or possessions to the less fortunate - edible, fresh, clean, in suitable condition.

Types of Fasting that Foster Will-Power & Self-Control

Replace the void from fasting with prayer & almsgiving & more virtuous living

- From food that is either too much, not very nutritious or harmful to your well-being
- From pleasures that are in excess for a balanced, wholesome life-style
- From unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling, speaking, behaving
- From sinful tendencies that strain or harm relationships and/or situations.

Never fast in excess or in such a way as to do harm to yourself or another.

Great Fast Prayers and Practices

The Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian

O Lord and Master of my life, drive from me the spirit of discouragement, negligence, ambition and idle talk (*prostration*).

Grant me, Your servant, the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and charity (*prostration*).

Yes, my Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not judge others for You are blessed forever and ever. Amen. (*prostration*)

Prayer for Forgiveness

God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

God, cleanse me of my sins and have mercy on me.

I have sinned without number: forgive me, O Lord

Veneration of the Cross

To Your cross, O Master, we bow in veneration, and we glorify Your holy resurrection.

The Jesus Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Having Suffered

O Jesus Christ, Son of God, for us You suffered the bitter passion, have mercy, have mercy, have mercy on us.

Let My Prayer Rise

Let my prayer rise like incense before you; and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

Fasting Practices

In virtue of rules enacted by the Synod of Bishops under the presidency of the Major Archbishop in 1969, the following rules of abstinence oblige in the United States:

- Abstinence from meat and all dairy products on the first day of the Great Fast and on Good Friday.
- Abstinence from meat on all Fridays of the year.
- During the Great Fast the faithful may also maintain the tradition of abstaining from meat on Wednesdays.

Explanation of the Crucifixion Icon

“The event of the Crucifixion leads us into the greatest expression of the divine mystery of love. ‘There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friend.’ (Jn 15:14) We can only approach the Crucifixion with awe and wonder at God’s condescension. ‘And it was thus that he humbled Himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross!’ (Phil. 2:8).

“The Icon of the Crucifixion presents the entire event. The city is seen in the background, and at the foot of the cross is a dark place representing ‘the place of the skull.’ All creation was moved by Christ’s death. Scripture tells us that at the time of our Lord’s death the sun and the moon were darkened. These are portrayed by two dark circles to the left and the right of our Lord. Above our Lord’s head was placed the inscription, ‘Jesus Christ, King of the Jews.’ In many icons this is written under the light of grace, to read: ‘The King of Glory.’

“ For the most part, Byzantine art does not concentrate on depicting material human reactions or feelings. Rather, the icon strives to depict the deeper spiritual reality with the insight of grace. Whenever we refer to the Crucifixion we never see it apart from our Lord’s Resurrection. For this reason the inscription on the armrest of many icons of the Crucifixion reads, ‘We bow to Your cross, O Lord, and we praise Your holy resurrection.’ Our prayer on Great and Holy Friday looks upon the cross as a saving event. We, too, stand before the cross of Christ and enter this event” (*Come Bless the Lord Icon Packet* 19-20).

Background: Great Fast—Forgiveness and Repentance, Prophecy Fulfilled

The Byzantine Church prepares its faithful--spiritually, psychologically and physically-- to enter into the joys of the Feast of the Resurrection.

Pascha (Easter), the Feast of all Feasts, is the greatest and most joyful solemnity of the Christian Church. The Feast celebrates the Resurrection of Christ within the context of salvation history recorded in the Bible. In the Paschal Mystery we live through: Creation, the Fall of the first humans created, the Promise of a Redeemer, the calling of the Hebrews as God's Chosen people, and the crossing of the Red Sea as the Hebrews are liberated from the bondage of Egypt. And, like the Hebrews in their preparation for the Feast of the Passover, the Church invites her members to make a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage not involving geographical traveling, but rather a spiritual journey into the center of one's being.

"Just as Israel, advancing toward Jerusalem, was purified and instructed in the desert so that they would forget the customs of Egypt, so it is right that during the season of the Great Fast (Lent) we should give our attention to our cleansing and purification, so that setting forth from here and mindful of fasting we can ascend to the Upper Room with the Lord." (Festal Letter VI, Saint Athanasius of Alexandria)

In the Eastern Churches the Paschal cycle begins eleven weeks before Easter with the Sunday of Zaccheus and terminates eight weeks after Easter with the Sunday of All Saints. The cycle is divided into the Pre-Lenten period, the period of the Great Fast, Passion Week and the period of the Easter celebration.

The principal aim of the Paschal Cycle is to prepare our hearts and our souls for a worthy encounter with the Risen Lord through humble prayer, fasting and meditation on the passion and sufferings of Jesus. The second aim of the cycle is to have us participate in Christ's Joy, in His Victory and Triumph over death—for just as Christ rose from the dead, so we, too, rise to New Life.

The Liturgical services of this season bear both a penitential and a joyful character and remind us that, like Christ, we must pass through the Golgotha of our lives if we are to enter into the joys of Everlasting Life. The period of the Great Fast is therefore referred to as a time of Sad-Brightness or of Bright-Sadness.

What is the Great Fast?

The Great Fast is a time of penitence, repentance, expiation – a time to examine our consciences and to seek reconciliation. It is a time of spiritual growth and illumination, a time for renewed efforts to hear and listen to the Voice of God in our lives. It is a time to commemorate and to recall the historical symbolism of the number forty: Noah and the flood – forty days and forty nights of rain, Israelites wandering in the desert for forty years, Christ’s fast in the desert before He began His public ministry, Christ entombed forty hours – time from His Death to His Resurrection.

It is a time of Sad-Brightness, a time to recall the sadness of exile, of wasted time and opportunity, a time to recall the brightness of God’s Loving Presence and His Mercy and Forgiveness. (Picture the early rays of the sun rising over the top of the mountain while the Valley is still in darkness). It is a time set aside for our readiness to enter into the journey through prayer, fast, penance and meditation.

A Look at the Pre-Lenten Sundays

Pre-Lenten Sunday: The Sunday of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10) DESIRE

In Zaccheus we see a man whose desire to see Christ was so great that he was determined to overcome his natural limitation (short of stature) even if in doing so he opened himself to ridicule by his fellowmen. And so, Zaccheus climbed a tree, an embarrassing posture for a tax collector. As a tax collector, he was an object of derision to the Jews. On seeing Jesus, Zaccheus repents of his selfish and hurtful actions. Repentance begins as a rediscovery of the deepest nature of desire – the desire for God and His righteousness.

First Pre-Lenten Sunday: Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18: 10-14) HUMILITY

Humility is truth. It is not the denial of who I am nor of what I have achieved, rather, it is the recognition that all I am, all I have, all that I may ever be, is God’s gift to me. We are entirely dependent on the goodness and mercy of God, our Father. Without Him, there would be no existence, no conversion, no sorrow for sin. Humility is the beginning of true conversion and the foundation of sincere penance and fasting.

Second Pre-Lenten Sunday: Sunday of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) REPENTANCE.

Nothing on earth can satisfy our hunger or our thirst for happiness. On this day the Church tells us the story of three people:

- a loving father welcoming with joy his son who has returned. – a father who has waited and watched for this return so as to welcome his “wayward” son with unconditional love,
- a younger son coming home in disgrace, a son who has injured his father in a cruel manner by asking for what should not have been his before his father’s death,

- an older son who remained at his father's side and who is offended that his brother has been received so joyously and so generously.

Third Pre-Lenten Sunday: Sunday of Meatfare (Matthew 25:31-46) – Story of The Last Judgment PREPAREDNESS

The Gospel account reminds us of the strict and comprehensive account we will have to render on the day of Judgment. It calls us to amendment of life, sorrow for sin, fasting and repentance.

Fourth Pre-Lenten Sunday: Sunday of Cheesefare (Matthew 6:14-21) RECONCILIATION

On this day, the last day before the Great Fast, the Church teaches us the importance of reconciliation with one another. She reminds us that if we are to enter into the Eternal Homeland, we must seek to forgive and to be forgiven. After the Vesper Service, all engage in a service of mutual forgiveness. If we are to seek the forgiveness of God during this time, we must first be at peace with one another.

From ancient times in early monasteries a beautiful custom existed in which the rite of forgiveness on Cheesefare Sunday was performed. The rite of forgiveness was carried out in the evening following a light meal. The monks in the presence of the faithful asked pardon of one another and then embraced and gave each other the sign of peace. The faithful did the same among themselves.

CONSCIOUSNESS EXAMEN

During the Great Fast we take collective responsibility for our lives and for the activities of the community of which we are a part. Although we realize that we did not create the world into which we are born, we nevertheless have responsibility for what it is like as long as we participate in it. While the struggle to change ourselves and our world may be long and painful, it is our struggle. To the extent that we have failed to do all that we could to make ourselves and our community all that God intended it to be, we ask God and one another for forgiveness, and we now commit ourselves to act differently.

For all our sins, the God who makes forgiveness possible, forgive us, pardon us and make atonement possible.

- For the sins we have committed before You by being so preoccupied with ourselves that we ignored the larger problems of the world in which we live.
- For the sins we have committed by being so directed toward outward realities that we have ignored our spiritual development.
- For the sins of giving up on social change and focusing exclusively on personal advancement and success.
- For the sins of having too little compassion or too little respect for those around us.
- For the sins of not supporting one another as we attempt to change.
- For the sins of not seeking the spark of divinity within each person we encounter and within ourselves.
- For the sins of doubting our ability to love and get love from others.
- For the sins of being judgmental.
- For the sins of not taking risks for values that we believe in.

- For the sins of focusing only on our weaknesses and not on our strengths and beauty.
- For the sins of not adequately rejoicing and celebrating the beauty and grandeur of God's creation.
- For all these, Lord of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Let each person go to the members of the group and ask for forgiveness and give a blessing.

Background:

Outline for Forgiveness and Repentance

What is the Great Fast or Lent?

In observing the forty days of the Great Fast, we imitate Christ who spent forty days fasting and praying in the desert. During the Holy Season we once again renew our efforts to become more Christ-like by recalling the Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection. With sincere efforts of prayer, fasting and good works, we shed our sinful past and "put on the new person." The Great Fast is like a retreat held by the entire Church, a time of spiritual renewal, a time of repentance.

In the Early days of the church, forty days before Easter, the "learners" or Catechumens intensified their preparations for receiving the Mysteries of Initiation: Baptism, Christmation and Holy Eucharist. It was also a time when the Penitents became reconciled with the Church. Since it was a time of preparation for the Glorious Feast of the Resurrection, all the faithful took part in the instructions, prayers, fasting as a renewal of their spiritual lives in preparing for the acceptance of the "New Life" given to everyone at Pascha.

There are forty days in the Great Fast. The number forty comes from the Old Testament, when Moses led the Israelites wandered for forty years in the desert. God tested them and strengthened their faith and they learned that the Lord God was to be the very center of their lives. We too during Lent deepen our faith and move toward the fullness of the heavenly kingdom which is our inheritance.

The number forty also reminds us of the forty days Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism. Here He resisted the temptations while building a closer communion with His Heavenly Father. It was during these forty days that Christ embraced the mission of being His Father's servant and our redeemer. We in turn also take our missions as Christians more seriously at this time.

Both Moses and Elijah prepared themselves for forty days for important encounters with God. We too will encounter God as we recall the Paschal mysteries as God reveals to us who he is, how much he loves us, who we are and the true meaning of our lives.

The Church prepares us for this important time of the year with five preceding Sundays. These Sundays reveal the qualities that we should have during Lent. These are:

- The Sunday of Zacchaeus - A strong desire to love God
- The Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee - Humility
- The Sunday of the Prodigal Son - Admitting our sinfulness
- Sunday of Meatfare - (The Last Judgment) -- Love of Neighbor
- Sunday of Cheesefare or Forgiveness Sunday - We must forgive others

The last two Sundays also refer to the fact that meat and dairy products were not to be eaten during the Great Fast. Today the least that the church expects of us is to avoid meat and dairy

products on the First day of Lent and on Great (Good) Friday and to avoid meat on all Fridays of the Great Fast. During Matins or Morning Prayer we say, "The true Fast is the one which drives us away from sin " and cuts us off from sinful passions. The true Fast is the love of God, fervor in prayer, tears of contrition and concern for the poor and needy, as Christ teaches us in the Scriptures.

It is mentioned above that the Sunday just before Lent is called Forgiveness Sunday. Why is forgiveness important?

One of the biggest blocks to peace is holding on to anger, resentments and self-pity. Full recovery is impossible without *Forgiveness*. Peace of mind is impossible without *Forgiveness*. And a point will come where further growth is impossible without forgiveness. Lack of forgiveness holds us back and keeps us stuck in misery. Some of things that we insist on holding onto when we refuse to forgive are anger, resentment, being right, staying still, dependencies, blame, fear, guilt, shame, being a victim, hate and getting even. This list could go on and on.

Resentment keeps us in the past. We cannot be in the present moment when we resent. When we resent, we relive the old feelings over and over again. The problem is that our bodies do not know the difference between a real experience and a thought. If you are refeeling, reliving a past experience in your mind, your body responds as if the act were happening now. So when you recall something that you are angry about, the feelings of anger replay throughout your body, doing damage to it and producing ulcers, stress, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, etc. The root of the word forgive is to *let go*.

Even when we know how damaging holding on is, why is it so hard to let go? Until we know how we benefit from forgiving, we will never want to change. Until we know that we are willing to forgive so that we feel better, for our own peace of mind, we will continue to hang onto our resentments and be miserable. What we are actually holding onto is only a memory of an event that took place in the past. It is no longer real at this present moment.

It is only a memory that we have in our minds and, therefore, re-feel in our bodies and emotions. Take a minute, close your eyes. Now, imagine yourselves in a very good frame of mind. Now imagine someone who has made statements that have caused you pain. Let yourself feel your feeling about those statements. Now imagine that this person has just come into this room. This person does not say a word but merely looks at you. You no longer feel good but recall the other times that you have felt pain. Without anything happening, you have given this person the power to take away all your good feelings – this person controls you.

Another word for forgiveness is *atonement*. Atonement or at-one-ment or becoming one with the other person. Atonement is a correction of our belief of separation. We become *at one* by becoming willing to give up whatever separates us. We become *at one* when we know that we are both children of the same God with the same purpose deep within us. That purpose is to get to Heaven and be with our Heavenly Father. We feel at peace when we find our similarities, not our differences.

Forgiveness is a Choice

Forgiveness is a choice freely made. It is a gift we can give or withhold. We can reject it when it is offered to us. Forgiveness is not an instinctive response. When we are hurt, we want to retaliate. It is an act of faith because it shows the divine spark that is present within us. No matter what we are thinking and feeling, our suffering and resentments do not change the fact that somewhere within the other person is a spark of love, goodness and life. Our unwillingness to forgive is all that is standing in the way of our seeing this.

When we become willing to let go of our resentments, we will open up to love. As we are willing to have these blocks removed, emptying ourselves of that which has kept us separated from our companion human beings, we will begin to let in love.

There are no magic answers. I would like to share with excerpts from a book entitled *Practical Psychology for Pastors* written by Miller and Jackson and published by Prentice Hall. Often people fail to forgive because they confuse forgiveness with the following five things, which forgiveness is not. It might be useful to help you distinguish between forgiveness and these five other processes.

First, forgiveness is not the same as AMNESIA. Forgiving and forgetting are different. Forgiveness does not require forgetting. As a matter of fact, I cannot forgive what I have forgotten. You can only forgive what you remember! Actually forgiveness enables forgetting! Certainly forgetting is not a prerequisite, nor does forgiveness require the promise to forget. It may actually be much more difficult to forget.

Second, forgiveness is not ACQUITTAL. Forgiveness does not mean that the other person is found blameless or not responsible. Forgiveness is only required when it is recognized that the other person is responsible for what happened. One does not deny responsibility in order to be forgiven, nor does forgiveness require that later on the two persons deny what took place. *Forgiveness is given in the face of responsibility!*

Third, Forgiveness is not an AWARD! It cannot be earned nor given to the most deserving person. Forgiveness is giving freely without regard for merit.

Fourth, forgiveness is not APPROVAL! To forgive is not to approve the action or agree with it. It does not require that the forgiving person say, "I think what you did is OK." In fact forgiveness is needed only when one does *not* approve. It is given in the face of disapproval.

Fifth and finally, forgiveness is not ACQUIESCENCE! It is not a license to go and do as one pleases in the future. It is not a moratorium in values, a suspension of rules. It is not permission to stay the same, but rather in a very mysterious way forgiveness itself inspires and enables change. Forgiveness is given in the face of knowledge that the future may or may not be different, but also with the enabling help that it will be different.

Forgiveness is none of these things. Forgiveness is an *affirming acceptance of the person* distinguished from her or his actions. It is a reflection of that profound or unconditional love that God has for us. Forgiveness is an alternative for anger. Better yet, it is a *response* to anger. And like its opposite, aggression, forgiveness begets itself. Those who are forgiven are enabled to forgive. There is a relationship between the extent to which a person is accepting of others and the degree of self-acceptance. One who forgives others is able to accept forgiveness also. One who accepts personal faults, again do not confuse this with approval or acquiescence, one who accepts personal faults and shortcomings is enabled to extend this same generosity to others.

If you recall, at the beginning I quoted the verse from Next Sunday's Gospel, "If you forgive the faults of others, your heavenly Father will forgive you, yours. If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you." This is repeated several times in the New Testament perhaps in different words. At the Last Judgment, Matthew 26:31-46, Christ says "Come, you have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, etc." And when those on the right hand ask when did we do this He answers "I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brethren, you did it for me." How we treat each other, that is how God is going to treat us. Another time, Jesus said that if you go to the altar to offer sacrifice and there recall that your sister or brother holds something against you, leave you gift at the altar and make amends with your sister or brother. Then return to the altar and offer your sacrifice to God. This requires forgiveness and reconciliation. There is a story of little Mickey. He goes to father Walter for confession. And he confesses that he is sorry for hurting his sister, who by the way is 3 years older, calling her names and punching her. Mickey also says the he loves his sister very much and repeats that he is very sorry for hurting his sister. Father Walter asks Mickey "Are you really very sorry for hurting your sister"? Mickey answers "Yes." "You really love your sister, don't you?" Again Mickey answers "yes." "For your penance when you go home give your sister a nice big hug and tell her that you love her." Mickey answers very emphatically "NO! NEVER!" It isn't enough to be sorry, we must also become reconciled. We must forgive and ask for forgiveness.

Scripture is insistent that forgiveness is linked to love and is necessary for salvation. Since it is a choice and even though it might be difficult to forgive, it is required that we do so. A deep wound seldom heals overnight, even where the desire to forgive is present. If we just pray for the person who hurt us, God will give us the strength to forgive. Forgiveness heals the spirit and liberates the soul so that it can grow spiritually and provides meaning and purpose to our lives.

Because we are human, we will also have to ask for forgiveness from God, from others and from ourselves. Jesus came to assure of God's forgiveness provided we are truly sorry. St. Paul says, "while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom.5:8) and in Psalm 103: 12 we find these words about forgiveness: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He put our transgressions from us." Forgiveness cannot be presumed. Honesty demands that we acknowledge our guilt to God and to others with a sincere expression of sorrow and an effort to make amends whenever possible. Erma Bombeck wrote that "There is only one thing harder in this world than forgiving. It's to ask for forgiveness armed only with, 'I'm sorry.'"

At times we must forgive ourselves. There is no need for us to punish ourselves since we are weak human beings. C.S. Lewis wrote: "If God forgives us we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him." In his letter to the Ephesians St. Paul wrote, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:31-32).

On Easter Sunday night, when the Risen Lord appeared to his disciples He said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then He breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound" (John 20: 21-23).

Because God forgives us everyday our many sins, we are obliged to forgive others. Father Alexander Schmemmann has written: "The triumph of sin, the main signs of its rule over the world, is division, opposition, separation, hatred. Therefore, the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness: the return to unity, solidarity, love. To forgive is to put between me and my enemy the radiant forgiveness of God Himself. To forgive is to reject the hopeless 'dead-ends' of human relations and to refer them to Christ. Forgiveness is truly a breakthrough of God's Kingdom into this fallen and sinful world."

An exercise of forgiveness will be given to you which you may try when you are alone or in a small group, either in church or at home. We are challenged to receive God's forgiveness and to forgive. Keep in mind these words from Matthew 6: 14 "If you forgive the faults of others, your heavenly Father will forgive you, yours. If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you."

Repentance

Do you recall the story of "Little Mikey"? When Father Walter told him that for his penance he was to go home and give his sister a hug and tell her that he loved her, Mikey's answer was an emphatic "NO! NEVER!" Well, if we really forgive our actions and words will show it. We will be kinder; we will be careful with what and how we talk to others. Our behavior will change. This is what Repentance is all about. *Repentance is returning to God.* In Mt 3:20, St. John the Baptizer says, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." St. Peter in Acts 2:38 preached "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Repentance means a turning around, a change of mind, a conversion. It means that we recognize that God has to be the center of our lives, our decisions, our experiences. We want to experience God in our hearts; that is, be in union with Him. We look ahead, recognizing God's love for us and how we can cooperate with the Divine Grace that God has given us. Do we realize how much God loves? We have heard the story of the Prodigal Son so often that we don't stop to think about the full meaning of the story. The younger son told the father that he wanted his inheritance "NOW!" It is the same as saying "I wish you were dead". Then, only when he hit rock bottom, did he decide to return to his father and ask for forgiveness. He had to admit that he had done wrong, and he was also thinking of himself, for he realized that even the servants in his father's house were better off than he was.

Yet, in spite of this the Father was looking out for his son's return and welcomed him. Would your father have done this? I know my father would not have accepted me back. But God does!

The Old Testament tells us that even if our sins are as red as scarlet, God will forgive us all our sins if we repent by being truly sorry for our sins and change our way of living. That is, sincerely try not to sin again. We pray during Matins "On the Cross You showed the good thief that it is possible to enter Paradise. Open to me the gates of repentance; close the doors of my evil desires, and I will sing of your divine goodness."

Repentance is a constant part of our life that needs to be always renewed as long as we live. During the Great Fast, the Church reminds us of the three best ways to repent: Prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Fasting - Fasting is a decision that I make freely and brings me closer to God. After all, we are totally dependent on God for everything from the air we breathe to the ground we walk on. God is my source for everything. And all of us need to be reminded of who is our source of everything we can ever need. Fasting then becomes a means of joy and gratitude in our lives, acknowledging a deep personal relationship with God in our lives.

Almsgiving - Alms are good works. Opportunity for alms surrounds us. We can do them for our family, our friends and strangers in some practical, loving way. There are people who need a listening ear, an extra hand, a smile and perhaps food and clothing, etc. Never underestimate the power of a smile, a kind word or a kind act. We can work for social justice in a variety of ways. The best alms to give are ourselves and our time.

Repentance involves Reconciliation or Confession. It is here that we acknowledge our sinfulness to a priest who represents Christ, especially if you have a serious or mortal sin. Even little sins can lead us to serious sins. A guide to help you examine your conscience will be available at the learning centers. We started with forgiveness which is insufficient without repentance.

"If you forgive the faults of others, your heavenly Father will forgive you, yours. If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you. When you fast, you are not to look glum as the hypocrites do. They change the appearance of their faces so that others may see that they are fasting. I assure you, they are already paid. When you fast, see to it that you groom your hair and wash your face. In that way no one can see that you are fasting but your Father who is hidden; and your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you. Do not lay up for yourselves an earthly treasure. Moths and rust corrode; thieves break in and steal. Make it your practice instead to store up heavenly treasure, which neither moths or rust corrode nor thieves break in and steal. Remember, where your treasure is, there your heart is also." (Mt 6:14-21)