

# **Saint Nicholas Serbian Orthodox Church**

*971 St. Clair Rd, Johnstown, PA 15905*

**Rev. Presbyterian Dragan Vukovic**

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## **Forgiveness Sunday (03.02.2025.)**

### **Matthew 6:14-21**

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. **(KJV)**

The Great Fast is beginning in God's Holy Church. The journey to Pascha is intended to be life-changing and life-renewing. Sin is to be cast from our lives. Believers are to increase in unity with Jesus Christ.

Great Lent is to be embraced as a period for growth in the Lord Jesus Christ. People are to complete the Lenten journey as more like the Lord Jesus Christ than they were at the beginning.

The present Gospel speaks about the treasures that are in the heart. Believers are to lay up treasure in heaven which are lasting value. Great Lent is the time to carefully assess what or Who is most prized in the heart.

Fasting enables believers to remove from daily life all that is not of Jesus Christ. The Lenten journey involves Christ becoming a greater part of each person's life.

Joy increases in the heart, mind and soul as the believer increases in the life in Christ. The Church offers the nourishment and teachings of Christ to guide the believer in the journey to Pascha.

The investment a believer makes in Great Lent determines the degree of benefit that will be experienced. Great Lent is an opportunity to invest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Fasting and prayer help the believer to sharpen the focus on the Lord Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven. During Great Lent believers will have ample opportunity to think about the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lenten services keep the believer focused on addressing personal sin and on repentance. Repentance is completely voluntary in the Church. The benefits of repentance are immeasurable.

Great Lent occurs every year. The Church has found continuing value in Great Lent. Attentive believers find enrichment in the content of the Divine services throughout the Lenten journey.

Forgiveness is a major theme in the present Gospel. Forgiveness is central to the Lord's Prayer recited throughout the Christian life. Forgiveness keeps relationships healthy and reduces animosity.

Sincere repentance comes from the heart and frees the person from burdensome thoughts. Husbands and wives have healthy marriages when forgiveness abounds

Parents need to be forgiving of their sons and daughters during the days of life. Sons and daughters improve their relationships with their parents with frequent forgiveness.

Healthy parishes know the value of practicing forgiveness. The Sunday of Forgiveness draws attention to the value of forgiveness at the beginning of Great Lent.

The practice of mutual forgiveness among parishioners and the parish priest enables the Lenten journey to begin well. God's goodness and mercy are necessary for forgiveness to dwell in the heart, mind and soul.

The journey from the Baptismal font to the Heavenly Kingdom and eternal life offers countless opportunities for forgiveness. Wise believers are quick to forgive others.

Believers attentive to the Lord's Prayer realize that forgiveness from God and forgiveness in personal relationships are interrelated. Life is difficult. Forgiveness makes some of the difficulty manageable.

May the Good and Merciful God make this Great Lent beneficial for each person entering the journey with good intent. May God's love abound in each heart laying up treasures in heaven.

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**Forgiveness Sunday. Great Martyr Theodore the Tyre. February 17/March 2, 2025, Hidden Valley, Pennsylvania. Father Rodney Torbic**

***Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,***

***The blessing of a home is one of the most beautiful and profound traditions of our Orthodox faith, deeply connected to the Feast of Theophany. On this day, we commemorate the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Jordan River, where He sanctified the waters for the salvation of mankind. The Church blesses the waters on this holy day, as a powerful symbol of spiritual cleansing and renewal. Just as the holy water blessed on Theophany represents the***

*sanctification of all creation, the blessing of our homes with this same holy water brings God's blessing, peace, and divine presence into our lives.*

*Saint Luke of Crimea, a great archbishop and surgeon, taught us that "Where there is prayer, there is peace, and where there is peace, there is God." Just as Christ's baptism sanctified the waters, the blessing of our homes with this same holy water grants us the grace of the Holy Spirit, bringing peace, protection, and God's presence into our homes. By receiving this blessing, our homes become places where God's grace dwells, reminding us to live in harmony with His will.*

*We invite you, dear brothers and sisters, to open the doors of your home to God's blessing this Theophany season. Schedule the blessing of your home and allow the prayers of the Church, the sanctified water, and the presence of the Holy Spirit to fill your home with light and peace. Father Dragan Vukovic is available for this sacred act and can be reached at 814-244-4063.*

*May the blessing of the Holy Spirit be with you and your families, granting you health, love, and spiritual joy.*

*With love in Christ,*

*Yours in the Lord,*

*Fr. Dragan Vukovic*

## **PEOPLE DON'T FAST BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW THE MEANING OF LENT**

### **Interview with Archbishop Mark of Berlin and Germany on the joy of Great Lent**

*[Archbishop Mark of Berlin](#), [Monk Raphael \(Popov\)](#)*

*For many people, Great Lent is a time, let's be honest, of difficulty and sorrow. Statistics show that every year only three to five percent of those who call themselves Orthodox Christians observe Lent, and even those don't adhere to it strictly. Why don't people see the joy of Lent? Wherein lies this joy? How does one who has never observed Lent begin? We spoke with [Archbishop Mark \(Arndt\)](#) of Berlin and Germany.*



*Archbishop Mark (Arndt)*

—Vladyka, our conversation will be broadcast during **Great Lent**, and that is the topic of today's conversation. Great Lent is a time filled with special ceremony, special meaning. There is, of course, abstinence and self-limitation. But many people today associate abstinence with something negative and sorrowful, which can lead to despair. Your Eminence, how is one to observe Lent in joy not in sorrow?

—Firstly I would correct you: Lent is not self-limitation. On the contrary, it is emancipation. Emancipation from unnecessary burdens, the unnecessary difficulties that each person bears. It is the emancipation from physical burdens, of course, but it is also freedom from spiritual burdens, for we try to free ourselves from the burden of our sin. Great Lent is the best time for this. For our salvation, it is a time when we pay special attention to our spiritual life; when we free ourselves from bodily burdens, then the spirit of man is freed to begin his spiritual struggle.

Sadly, not every layperson is able to attend all divine services during Great Lent, but even the few who can attend and listen to the words of prayer, who concentrates on them, experiences them, is incredibly enriched. Even if not all the words are understandable, the fact that he heard them is important to a great degree. The divine services of Great Lent are theologically abundant! They help us understand the meaning of Lent. The Holy Fathers left an enormous spiritual treasure for us—these wonderful services of Great Lent. They are so filled with theological wisdom! They lead us towards death, towards the death on the cross that Our Savior experienced for us, and towards the two forms of death, one might say, in human experience.

Firstly, we are given the opportunity to cleanse ourselves from the sinful layers covering our conscience, so that at any moment we are prepared to hand ourselves over to God, to the other world. But it is also a death that we wish for our sins, the dying within a person of all that is sinful, and the revelation of all that is bright, Divine and heavenly. If we view Great Lent in this way, then this is a time of great joy, joy that we can experience every day.

Every new day is a new time for repentance that we are offered. But we also can experience the anticipation of the Resurrection of all. It is no accident that the resurrection of mankind is

celebrated before the [Resurrection of Christ](#). It was enabled by the Resurrection of our Savior, and there is a causal relationship: we experience this the week before the Resurrection of Christ, during the day of the Resurrection of Lazarus, which reminds us of our own future resurrection. If we properly immerse ourselves in the contents of the Divine Services of Great Lent and its meaning, then it will be a great joy and emancipation.

—**Your Eminence, polls show that in Russia and throughout the whole world that not many people observe Lent. In Russia, as in prior years, only about three percent of all Russians who consider themselves Orthodox Christians observe lent more or less strictly. The virtue of [abstinence](#) is not very popular. Why is this?**

This happens first of all because of ignorance of Lent. Ignorance of its meaning and its forms. The meaning is hidden from those who do not attend divine services, do not immerse themselves into their essence, into the content of Lent. For them, Great Lent turns into some form of gymnastics at best. This relates to the spiritual side of life.

If we talk about the physical aspect of Lent, people do not fast because they don't understand that during Lent they can free themselves of their physical burdens, from that which is entirely unnecessary, and they learn to master the material world. Remember, when God created the world he made man the master over all things, that is, to rule over Nature. And we see how many, many people in our time become slaves of the material, first of all slaves to their passions. This includes those who cannot quit smoking, cannot refrain from gluttony, etc. There are many times in our lives when we think that we cannot overcome this or that. Through confessions that I hear I know that many struggle with some sort of passion, and they think that it is impossible to succeed.

In fact, when a person understands the essence of Lent, when he practices Lent, he becomes so happy that he cannot live without it. It is a mistake to think that people cannot live without a variety of food. When I was on Mount Athos, my spiritual father ate nothing for 40 days, and he lived to a venerable old age. He actually did not eat at all. He drank very weak tea—that was all. And I know of other people who practice the same thing. Maybe they don't fast for 40 days, but they do for long periods of time.

I remember, one of my female parishioners who I had convinced to fast thanked me at the end of Great Lent, saying “I am so happy! I am so satisfied!” So when a person understands what he is doing and why, he is capable of a great deal.

The same applies to prayer. When a person does not pray, or prays for only 5 minutes, he cannot assess the power of prayer, he cannot sense the joy that grows from within. And so he won't try, maybe his whole life, if there is no impetus that will lead him to try to pray for real at least once. There are many aspects to this, which require an open heart.

I will tell you one story that made a great impression on me. In our Parish there were a few Greek families who attended our church only because we observe the Orthodox calendar, not the Roman Catholic one. They understood nothing except Allelulia and Eis polla eti despota, but they attended because they knew that we did things the right way. And on the Friday of the first week

of Lent, one Greek woman, who worked at a factory—it was very physical labor—told me during a conversation (not during confession): “Vladyka, on Wednesday I drank some water.” I thought I didn’t understand what she said, since I don’t speak Greek very well, so I asked her, “What did you say?” She repeated, “I drank water on Wednesday.” In bewilderment, I asked her: “Are you saying that you not only did not eat all week but that you didn’t drink?” “Of course!” She said, “Of course!” This is a woman who does physical labor. Then I came to understand that people can achieve a great deal if they desire it.

Twenty years ago, we started celebrating the [Liturgy of Pre-sanctified Gifts](#) every week during great Lent in the evening, but our Synod decided that those who wish to take communion must fast from the midnight before until that evening. I announced this to everyone and expected that no one would come. But they did! People who I knew worked in an office where people smoke, etc. They fasted all day, came to confession in the evening, and partook of the Holy Gifts. And what joy this brought them! This is something only experience can give you. Do you understand?! Of course, those who don’t try will never understand.

So, I think that the problem is that many are not prepared to take the first step. Take the leap across the stream! That is how [St. Mary of Egypt](#) jumped across the Jordan River, and, having once been a harlot, became a saint. Each of us needs to do the same.

**—Are there any ascetic exercises that will help a person gradually overcome their hesitation and develop the willingness to “jump over the stream”?**

First of all it is prayer. When a person applies himself to prayer, he will be prepared for physical fasting. When he sees how the mind and the spirit are made free, he will cherish this. I think about the unfortunate people who can’t quit smoking. I tell them to try first of all to abstain from smoking during Lenten days, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. This will be the beginning. And many have been able to overcome this passion this way.

The same applies to food. In our monastery, many monks adhere to the following rule: on lenten days they eat no food at all, only in the evening do they have a small meal, so all day they eat no food. This helps a person evaluate his power, to see that he can do and what he can’t do.

**—Vladyka, you said that he who observes lent properly experiences joy. There are the following words that are sung during Great Lent that say we fast the fast of joy: “Let us begin the fast with joy.” And we wish each other this during the Lenten period. Please remind us all what these words mean.**

I think that what it means is this we must refrain from “devouring our neighbor.” One of the first prayers before the beginning of Lent also tells us that it is the most difficult virtue that a man can achieve. Those words mean that we draw our spiritual strength during Lent for our spiritual development. In order for us not to stand pat, each Lenten period should be like the rung of a ladder that leads to Christ and to our own resurrection.

—In the [Prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian](#), we hear the following words “take from me the spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition, and idle talk.” Why does the prayer talk about the emancipation from these sins? For these are not the only sins.

I think that all the other sins are in one way or another connected to these. For if you look at each individual sin mentioned in this prayer, we see that it leads to a whole series of other things. Sloth often leads a person to abandon his struggle with sin; it leads to the condemnation of one’s neighbor, one thing after another. These are probably the central things we must keep in mind when we set out to struggle against our sins.

—Vladyka, in conclusion I would like to ask you to provide some counsel to our audience during Great Lent.

First of all I wish them to experience Lent for themselves. If only all Christians would try to observe Lent in earnest. Of course there are the sick, for whom Lent should not be strict, as long as it’s justified and necessary, and not simply from fantasy or one’s own desire. This must be discussed with one’s spiritual father

Each of us must deny something that is especially dear—it does not have to be food; for some it is television, for others games, etc. I wish for every Christian to take up the conscious struggle in earnest. For without struggle, as our Holy Fathers say, there is no victory. And we all desire victory, although there is no easy way to achieve it. That is why we must labor.

I also wish for everyone to enrich themselves spiritually. Those who have jobs and cannot attend all divine services, at least double your daily prayers, your spiritual reading, in this way obtaining for yourself something for your soul. The soul will be enriched this way. Then this will be an accomplishment.

—Thank you for everything. Glory be to God.

Thank you for your efforts.

*Monk Raphael (Popov)  
spoke with Archbishop Mark of Berlin*

# Services this Week

- **Saturday (03.08.2025.)**
  - Holy Hierom. Polycarp, Bp of Smyrna;  
*Theodore of Komogorina – Theodore's Saturday (After the Divine Liturgy, Sacrament of Confession)*
  - *Divine Liturgy starts at 09:30 AM.*
- **1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent – of Orthodoxy (03.09.2025.)**
  - 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Finding of the Honorable Head of St John the Baptist
  - *Divine Liturgy starts at 10:00 AM.*



## Donations February 23, 2025

**Offering – \$1,073.00      Candles – \$74.00      Dues – \$50.00**

### Large Candles

IMO Lazo & Bosa Vuckovich from Helene Gleason  
IMO John & Millie Pavich and Daughter Connie Bartis from Olga Bulich  
IMO Brother Joseph Kondas from Richard Kondas  
IMO Jeffrey Smith –41 years of marriage from wife Mariam Smith  
IMO Dorothy Thomas from John & Patricia Pavich  
IMO Joseph & Amelia Kondas from Richard Kondas

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### Our New Library!

We will be offering a selection of books for our parishioners to borrow for your enjoyment. All reads will be recommended by Father Dragan. At this time we have two available, "Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: Finding the Way to Christ in a Complicated Religious Landscape" and "Memory Eternal: Living with Grief as Orthodox Christians" – These titles are available in the Candle Room. Please feel free to sign one out and return when completed. If you have any suggestions, please speak with Father Dragan.

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**Nut, Apricot, and Poppyseed Rolls are still available!**

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## **Today is Cheesefare Sunday!**

### **Cheesefare Sunday or the Sunday of Forgiveness**

At the onset of Great Lent and a period of intense fasting, this Sunday reminds us of our need for God's forgiveness and guides our hearts, minds, and spiritual efforts on returning to Him in repentance.

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**Please see Suzette to sign up for your Fish Fry Slot**

# **UPCOMING EVENTS**

## **Lenten Fish Fries**

Friday, March 7th to Friday April 11, 2025

## **Lenten Vespers**

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – St. Mary of Egypt**

Sunday, April 6, 2025 – 5:00 PM

**\*Palm Sunday – Sunday, April 13, 2025**

**\* PASCHA! – Sunday, April 20, 2025**

**\* St. Nicholas Anniversary Celebration–**

Sunday, May 18, 2025

**\* Polka Fest – May 30, – June 1, 2025**

**\* Band of Brothers – July 2025**

**\* Taste of Serbia – Saturday, August 9, 2025**

**\* Johnstown Slavic Festival –**

September 19–20, 2025