Our Journey to Pascha

Suggestions for Living the Great Fast

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Acknowledgements

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Our Journey to Pascha

The Great Fast (Lent) is the time when we prepare to celebrate Pascha (Easter), the great Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. In the Eastern Churches Lent begins on Monday, the day after Cheese Fare Sunday, and lasts for forty days, until the beginning of the Great and Holy Week. Of course, all lenten practices apply during Great and Holy Week as well.

Most Christians of our time have thought of Lent as a time of don'ts: Don't eat meat, don't have parties, don't get married. But the Fast is only a time of don'ts because it is chiefly a time of dos: do give more time and energy to God, to growth in faith, to serving Him in His poor - all to make more authentic, more real our celebration of the Holy Resurrection.

The Tradition of the Church has always understood the Great Fast as a preparation for sharing in the joy of the resurrection. The practices of the season are meant to replace in our minds and hearts the cares of this life so that we may be more fully given to the new life in Christ. The Eastern Tradition speaks of the Fast as the springtime of the soul, the occasion of a new birth. As such it should be entered with joy as the prelude to the attainment of a fuller life in Christ, just as a woman's period of pregnancy and labor is the necessary prelude to the birth of a child.

The Church's earliest Tradition concerning this season emphasizes the great personal exercises of spiritual renewal:
prayer, fasting, and alms-giving (charity) about which Christ Himself spoke (Mt 6: 1-18). Even working in His name must be based on a lifestyle build around these poles, if it is to be effective (Mt 17: 21).

In the same way we need to "sit at the Lord's feet" and absorb His word, if we are to grow in the understanding of His way. The Church has always stressed this need for study of God's word among believers. The *Apostolic Tradition*, compiled in 315 AD, urges, "If there is an instruction on the word of God, everyone should go to it gladly. He will reflect in his heart that he is listening to God speak through the mouth of the one giving the instruction. ... On a day when no instruction is given, everyone in his own home is to take a book and read enough from it of what is useful to him." Study, therefore, becomes the fourth guidepost on the Lenten journey to Pascha.

**Fasting**

The first of the Church's traditional Lenten practices is the fast. Fasting can be done for many reasons, such as dieting or fostering a sense of self discipline. These reasons are not specifically Christian or even religious. What is it that makes fasting a specifically Christian - and Lenten - practice?

We learn from the book of Genesis that man is made in the image and likeness of God. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden of paradise - a world without work, without sadness, without death (i.e. without sin). But man chose to disobey God, to claim the right to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Sin came into the world and paradise was lost because of their eating. Eating, therefore, can be a symbol or sign of attempting to take control of our lives (sin). We, too, have fallen for this delusion and have allowed evil to come into our lives. We live in a world in which
there is work, sorrow and death. But man has always wanted to restore paradise. And it is during Lent that we prepare that journey back from man's first exile - the exile of Adam and Eve from paradise. We show by our fasting that we are not like Adam and Eve. Somehow to make us aware that our life is not in our own hands, the Church ask us to change the ordinary way in which we live and especially to change the way we eat. And so on Easter we will recover paradise and find there the tree of life, the Cross of Christ, and eat the fruit of immortality, the divine Body and Blood of Christ.

The Art of Fasting

In the Melkite Greek Catholic Church - as in the other Eastern Churches - fasting means to abstain from all foods from midnight until noon and from specific foods the rest of the day. These specific foods often include meat or meat products, dairy products, fish, olive oil, and wine or liquor.

In its fullest form this fast is kept daily, Monday through Friday, during both the Great Fast and Holy Week. On Saturdays and Sundays during Lent there is no period of fasting from all foods, and the list of specific foods from which we abstain is reduced (eg people might use olive oil and wine), except for Great Saturday (the Saturday of Holy Week) on which a strict fast is always kept.

This fast is an ideal set for us in the Eastern Church. It is not a matter of law. In a sense it is wrong to legislate an act of love, something which should come from the heart. But since the call to fast comes from the Lord, a sincere believer should know that some form of fasting is expected, even of those who cannot keep this strict fast for the whole of Lent.
Some suggestions for a partial fast include:

1. Keep a stricter fast during the first week, the fourth week (week of the Cross) and during Holy Week; or
2. Keep a stricter fast on Wednesdays and Fridays all during Lent; or
3. Keep a stricter fast on the first day of Lent and Good Friday plus no food between midnight and noon on all other weekdays of Lent; or
4. Abstain from all food and drink from midnight to noon on all the weekdays of Lent; or
5. At the very least abstain from meat on the First Day of Lent and on Holy Friday and on these two days fast from midnight to noon from all food and drink.

We should also recall that abstaining from our other customary diversions - such as entertainment, sports, etc. - can be another effective way of keeping the season, particularly when the time saved from these pursuits is given over to practices designed to help the individual grow in Christ.

**The Spiritual Fast**

The chants of the Lenten services often call on us to observe a *spiritual fast* to complete our bodily fasting. By this they mean abstaining from wrongdoing and devoting ourselves to good actions. The following chant from vespers of the first Wednesday in Lent speaks directly to each of us:

> While fasting bodily, let us fast spiritually as well: Let us loosen every bond of injustice; let us rip away the fetters of violence; let us cast away every unjust word; let us give bread to the hungry and welcome the homeless poor into
our houses, that we in turn may receive from Christ our God the riches of His mercy.

In today's America there are many community-based movements devoted to the needs suggested in this prayer. Almost every area has a Christian ministry devoted to the needs of the homeless or to "ripping away the fetters of violence" (child abuse, battered spouses, abortion). Many parishes have adopted such ministries and support them financially or by volunteering assistance in their programs. Surely the Great Fast is an appropriate time to intensify our participation in such activity, whether as an individual, a family, or a parish.

Another way in which we can take the opportunity for "spiritual fasting" is suggested by the following passage from The Shepherd of Hermas, one of the earliest examples of Christian literature in history:

On the day in which you fast, fulfilling what is commanded, ... having reckoned the price of the dishes on that day which you intended to have eaten, give it to the widow and the orphan and to the person in need, and thus you will show humility of spirit, so that he who has received benefit from your humility may fill his own soul, and pray for you to the Lord. If you have observed fasting as I have commanded you, your sacrifice will be acceptable to God, and this fasting will be written down; and the service thus performed is noble, sacred, and acceptable to the Lord. Therefore these things you shall observe with your children and all of your household, and in observing them you will be blessed; and as many as hear these words and observe them shall be blessed; and whatsoever they ask the Lord they shall receive.
This suggestion - that the money we save by not buying rich foods and by limiting our recreation and entertainment be used to help the poor or be given to some charity - is the inspiration for *The Shepherd's Care* program in the eparchy of Newton as well as similar programs in many Churches. In this program the money thus saved is placed in an Offering Box available to each family from their parish. These offerings are then brought to the church at the end of the Fast.

The Shepherd of Hermas specifically urges that observe this practice *with our children*. Many would react that children should not fast: they need their balanced diet, etc. With a little informed planning, a more than balanced diet can be assured using lenten foods. In addition, learning to fast helps children move away from our society's trend toward instant gratification of all wants (food, drink, drugs, sex). Who knows how many young people would not have become prone to addictions if they had been taught to fast?

Prayer

In the Eastern tradition, fasting without prayer is meaningless. It becomes simply an ascetic exercise related more to discipline of the flesh than to the growth of the spirit. And so our primary attention should be given to prayer, both private and communal. There should be more time for prayer - both for private prayer and the public prayer of the Church - if less time is spent on entertainments (radio, movies, television, parties etc.)

During Lent there are special services which try to put us in the proper mood for repentance or sorrow for sin:

A. *The Liturgy of St. Basil* - Served on the Sundays of Lent, this is longer than the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom and
contains a beautiful prayer in which the whole journey of the history of salvation is traced.

B. The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts - Since the Divine Liturgy is by its very nature a happy or festive occurrence, we fast from its joy during the weekdays of Lent. But so that we may still receive the Eucharist which is the necessary food for our souls, the Church gives us communion at a special vespers service called the Presanctified Liturgy.

C. Akathist to the Theotokos ("Prayer in which one does not sit") - Because the feast of the annunciation (March 25) most often occurs during Lent, a special prayer service to the Mother of God is said on Friday evenings. Traditionally, everyone stands during the entire service.

D. Great Compline - The expanded night prayer of the Church. As we continue our Lenten struggle we feel the need to call out "O Lord of Powers, be with us."

In addition to these we ought to spend some time each day in prayer, either alone or with the other members of our family. It can be presumed that anyone who has read this book at all has already begun to pray. We attend the Divine Liturgy and answer Lord, have mercy ... Grant this, O Lord ... and the rest. It is important as we grow in our interior lives, as we become more constantly aware of God's presence in us, to reemember the discipline of regular prayer: prayer as we begin and end each day ... prayer as we begin our work ... prayer always.

One way to foster this kind of awareness of God's presence - and the Great Fast is a most appropriate time to begin - is by using the Jesus Prayer, a truly ancient Eastern form of prayer. It is the prayer of the publican: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. This prayer is practiced
until it becomes part of one's very being: until, with each breath one takes, one is constantly calling on the blessed name of Jesus.

A way to begin the practice of the Jesus Prayer is to set aside five minutes three or four times a day to concentrate on God's presence and to repeat over and over again, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. In time it truly becomes an integral part of our lives. We find ourselves waking in the night with the blessed name of Jesus on our lips. At odd times during the day, whatever we are doing, we will find Jesus always there ... in our mind ... in our heart ... on our lips.

Another way to pray during Lent would be to pray the Church's own prayer by using the "hours", those short services of prayer designed for various times or "hours" of the day. The booklet *The Hours for Great Lent and Bright Week* (Liturgical Publications, 701 Foster Avenue, Duquesne, Pa. 15110) is available to help you fill this need.

The First Hour is intended for morning prayer before school and work. The Third Hour would fit in perfectly with a mid-morning break. The Sixth Hour is a perfect lunchtime prayer. Here you may want to meditate on the daily reading from Isaiah which ought to be done after the prayer "Let Your bounties, O Lord," and before "Holy God" on page 23 of the booklet mentioned above. The Ninth Hour might be prayed during the mid-afternoon break on as a family prayer before supper. After Pascha (Easter) for the whole of Bright Week the Hours are the same all day long: these may be found on page 36 and 37 of the same booklet.

If we are not able to pray the Hours in full, we might try learning the Prayer of St Ephrem and praying it at the same times during the day, as indicated above. Recited in almost
every church service during the Great Fast, this is the most characteristically lenten prayer of our Church.

The Prayer of St Ephrem the Syrian

O Lord and master of my life! Grant that I may not be infected with the spirit of slothfulness and inquisitiveness, with the spirit of ambition and vain talking. (Bow to the ground) Grant instead to me your servant the spirit of purity and humility, the spirit of patience and neighborly love. (Bow to the ground)

O Lord and King! Bestow upon me the grace of being aware of my sins and of not thinking evil of those of my brethren; for you are blessed forever and ever. Amen. (Bow to the ground)

O God, have mercy on me a sinner. (12 times with small bows)

Then again, with one bow to the ground, Yes, O Lord and King, bestow upon me the grace of being aware ...
Also available from Liturgical Publications is a small pamphlet, *Prayers for Lent*, which contains the most important prayers we need to use during this holy season. Please note that "A Lenten Hymn" on the next to last page is only in use among certain Slavs.

**Study**

*And this is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent* (Jn 17:3).

When we speak of study as forming part of our Lenten program we are referring to the acquisition of the knowledge of God that Jesus speaks of in the High Priestly prayer quoted above. The "textbook" in which this Divine Wisdom can be found is the Holy Scripture, the Bible. The "school" of Divine Wisdom is the Church; the "classes" are the divine services. The Church's evening services (vespers and the Presanctified Liturgy) generally include two readings: from Genesis and Proverbs (during Lent) or from Exodus and Job (during Holy Week). The midday service (Sixth Hour) includes a reading from the prophets: Isaiah during Lent and Ezechiel during Holy Week.

Our experience of school shows us that in order to profit from a lesson, we must prepare for it in advance and reflect on it after it is over. The same is true of the "instruction" which the Spirit of Wisdom wants to impart to us during Lent. We must set aside a regular period (once a day or once or twice a week) for Lenten "homework". To make this an occasion for the family to grow together, we have arranged a two-track program. The parents and older children can read in their Bibles the daily Scripture portions (called pericopes) listed below, while the younger children have an activity book for each week dealing with the same themes, but on their level
of understanding. These activity books are discussed at the end of this handbook.

Scripture Readings

For the Weekdays of the Great Fast

First Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Isaiah (noon)</th>
<th>Genesis</th>
<th>Proverbs (eve)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>1:19-2:3</td>
<td>1:14-23</td>
<td>1:21-33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>2:3-11</td>
<td>1:24-3:3</td>
<td>2:1-22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>2:11-21</td>
<td>2:4-19</td>
<td>3:1-18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>3:1-14</td>
<td>2:20-3:20</td>
<td>3:19-33</td>
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We begin "in the beginning" - that is with the book of Genesis: the story of God's creation of the world. Notice the water in both chapters one and two. You'll find the theme of water re-occuring frequently during Lent because it was during these forty days that catechumens prepared for baptism in the early Church. At this time also sinners were reconciled with God and the community in the mystery of repentance (called "a second baptism" by the Fathers). During this week let the youngsters work on the Creation Mobile, explaining to them that God is the One who gives us everything we have.

At the same time we begin to read from Isaiah the Prophet. The opening chapters of this book are a stirring call to repentance - sounding one of the main themes of our Lenten struggle.
Second Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Isaiah</th>
<th>Genesis</th>
<th>Proverbs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>5:7-16</td>
<td>4:8-15</td>
<td>5:1-15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>5:16-25</td>
<td>4:16-end</td>
<td>5:15-6:2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>6:1-12</td>
<td>5:1-24</td>
<td>6:3-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>7:1-14</td>
<td>5:32-6:8</td>
<td>6:20-7:2</td>
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adam
eat of
the fruit

EVE
The crowning point of creation was God's masterpiece: man, made in His image and likeness. Man wished to increase his likeness to God by experiencing evil (according to the serpent's deception). Instead the image was blurred and the likeness destroyed. The whole "economy of salvation" is to restore the image of the fallen Adam.

We continue reading the book of Proverbs for helpful hints on living a "godly" life. Let the children make the acquaintance of the *A B C's of Proverbs*, which they can continue during the fourth week.

### Third Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Isaiah</th>
<th>Genesis</th>
<th>Proverbs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>9:9-10:4</td>
<td>7:1-5</td>
<td>8:32-9:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>10:12-20</td>
<td>7:6-16</td>
<td>9:12-end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>11:10-12:2</td>
<td>7:11-8:3</td>
<td>10:1-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>13:2-13</td>
<td>8:3-21</td>
<td>10:31-11:2</td>
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Water again! This time it is the saga of one man's fidelity to God during a time of universal apostasy. The waters of the flood destroyed evil in the world but saved eight people in the ark. Noah's flood is considered a "type" or foreshadowing of baptism for this reason. The eight people saved in the ark are a "figure" or hint of the day of the resurrection, the "eighth day", the day without dusk, outside of time. Let the children work on the *The Story of Noah* during this week.
Fourth Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Isaiah</th>
<th>Genesis</th>
<th>Proverbs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>25:1-9</td>
<td>9:8-17</td>
<td>12:8-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>29:13-23</td>
<td>12:1-7</td>
<td>14:15-26</td>
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Like Noah, Abraham is an icon of faithful trust in God. He is the father of all believers. Isaac is a figure or type of Jesus because he carries the wood for his sacrifice. The youngsters should enjoy going through the *Abraham* "comic book". Point out to the children the connection between Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and God the Father's acceptance of the sacrifice of His Son for our salvation.

Fifth Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Isaiah</th>
<th>Genesis</th>
<th>Proverbs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>40:18-31</td>
<td>15:1-5</td>
<td>15:7-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>41:4-14</td>
<td>17:1-10</td>
<td>15:20-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>42:5-16</td>
<td>18:20-33</td>
<td>16:17-33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>45:11-17</td>
<td>22:1-18</td>
<td>17:17-18:5</td>
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As the grown-ups continue the life of Abraham, the youngsters jump the gun on *The Story of Joseph* and his brothers. He is another "type" or "figure" pointing to the coming of Jesus. Notice that Joseph was betrayed for pieces of silver and yet forgave and saved his brothers!
Sixth Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Isaiah</th>
<th>Genesis</th>
<th>Proverbs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>49:6-10</td>
<td>31:3-16</td>
<td>21:3-21</td>
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We are still trying to catch up with the kids by reading about Joseph in Egypt, but they're too fast for us: they're already beginning the book of Exodus and the story of *Moses - Journey to Freedom*. The burning bush (or, as the East calls it, "The Bush Unburned") is a type of the perpetual virginity of the Theotokos: the fire of the Divinity did not burn away her virginity! And that water again! It destroys the enslaver, but sets God's people free, another type of Baptism!

Holy Week

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Ezechiel</th>
<th>Exodus</th>
<th>Job</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Ez 1:1-20</td>
<td>Ex 1:1-20</td>
<td>Job 1:1-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Ez 1:21-2:1</td>
<td>Ex 2:5-10</td>
<td>Job 1:13-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Ez 2:3-3:3</td>
<td>Ex 2:11-25</td>
<td>Job 2:1-10</td>
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Moses himself prophesied that one day God would send them a prophet like himself. Moses is the last figure of Christ that we meet on our lenten journey. We are at the very gate of paradise once again. As the Israelites of old entered the Promised Land, we enter the church on Holy Saturday night. We have reentered paradise with the image restored and the likeness increased ready to eat from the tree of life, the Cross of Christ, the Fruit of Immortality: the Body and Blood of Christ. As God gave us the ten commandments through Moses, He gives us the commandment of the new law: *By this all men*
shall know that you are my disciples: that you love one another!
The children read Moses, Journey to a New Land.

Most honored Paradise, garden of beauty and delight,
dwelling place made perfect by God,
unending gladness and rejoicing,
delight of the prophets and home of the saints,
beseech the Creator of all
that He may open to me the gates I had closed by my sins,
and that I may be worthy once more
to partake of the tree of life and bliss
You had made mine from the beginning.

A Special Note for Parents

Parents have the responsibility before God of forming
their children in the Christian life and so their practice of Lent
should be more family oriented than those who have no
children. The study section above includes references to the
following resources which could be used week by week to
parallel your own readings:

First Week: Creation Mobile
Second Week: The ABC's of Proverbs
Third Week: The Story of Noah
Fourth Week: Abraham
Fifth Week: The Story of Joseph
Sixth Week: Moses: Journey to Freedom
Holy Week: Moses: Journey to a New Land

You might plan a specific family time together to
read and discuss these booklets each week. They are available,
for a total cost of under $5.00, from the American Bible
Society, PO Box 5677, Grand Central Station, New York, NY
10017.
Some additional family practices are:

* Talk about each church service you attend when you go home: what was different about the lenten worship and why (eg the dark colors of the vestments, the plaintive music, actions or concepts observed);

* Share with your children your own positive memories of Lent when you were child: the prayers, observances, and impressions you had at their age;

* Upgrade the reflective quality of their lives. Talk about some of the basic values found in the Lenten prayers: forgiveness, repentance, sharing, and healing. If you have a VCR, replace ordinary TV programs with videocassette renditions of the Bible stories in this book. Most religious bookstores carry at least one of the principal video series presently available:

* Children's Heroes of the Bible (Vision Video, 2030 Wentz Church Road, Worcester, Pa 19490)
* Hanna-Barbera's The Greatest Adventure (Tabor Publishing, PO Box 7000, Allen, Tx 75002)
* Superbook (Victor King Video, PO Box 708, Northbrook, Il 60062)

Remember, if you do not change the direction of your family experiences during the Fast, you teach your children that for you this season is not very important. Provide them with Lenten experiences which speak of its importance in family life and they will have memories to share with their own children.
For Your Lenten Reading

Daily Devotionals

The following booklets contain brief readings which can provide food for thought during a coffee break, before leaving for work, or as a part of one’s daily Rule of Prayer.

Journey Through the Great Fast (undated, Byzantine Catholic Archdiocese of Pittsburgh, Catechetical Center, 225 Olivia Street, McKees Rocks, PA 15136, 77 pages)

Lenten Reflections (1981, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Committee on Spiritual Life and Renewal, 8-10 East 79 Street, New York, NY 10021, 102 pages)

Fr. Thomas Hopko, The Lenten Spring (1983, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 575 Scarsdale Road, Crestwood, NY 10707, 162 pages)

Background

Fr. Alexander Schmemann, Great Lent (1969, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 575 Scarsdale Road, Crestwood, NY 10707, 124 pages) - The most popular introduction to the spirit and practice of the Great Fast in Byzantine Churches.