

A Family Lesson: How Will We Prepare for Pascha?

by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.

Often Great Lent is taught as a series of "shoulds" - we should go to Church, we should fast, we should pray, we should give alms. This approach focuses on "duty" and has a negative connotation to me. We need an "attitude adjustment"! This year, let's approach our family's lenten effort from a different perspective. Let's try for a loving response to what our Lord has done for us.

Step 1: What's Involved in Preparation?

Begin by asking family members how they have prepared for something important. Younger children may remember a piano or dance recital, a sports competition, a test in school. Teens may focus on getting a driver's license. Parents may reflect on preparing for their wedding day or the birth of their first child.

Whatever the experience, ask what was involved in the preparation period. Determine whether both knowledge and practice/action were required. For example, to get a driver's license a teenager has to pass a written test which means acquiring knowledge, and to pass a road test which means acquiring skills through practice. Parents can reflect on their premarital guidance sessions with their parish priest, or lack thereof. Guide the discussion to allow each family member to share his/her story of preparation. Be sure to ask how each felt during the process and after.

Step 2: What Do We Know About Great Lent?

Originally, Great Lent was the final preparation of the catechumens for their baptism at Pascha. The catechumens would fast, pray, study scripture, and do good works. The rest of the community joined the catechumens as a time for renewing their baptismal commitment to Christ. While the catechumenate has died off in most Orthodox parishes, since most enter the Church through infant baptism, we continue the practices of Great Lent as our personal preparation for Pascha.

In this step a variety of methods can be used to teach Great Lent in ways that are appropriate for your children. Throughout all of these the themes of anticipation of and preparation for Pascha should be emphasized.

Scripture

Review the biblical accounts of the Israelites wandering in the desert (Exodus 14-20) and Christ's temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11). These are traditional biblical understandings of Great Lent. Study some of the Old Testament passages about the Messiah (Isaiah 11, Isaiah 53, Zechariah 9:9, the Book of Jonah, and others).

Worship

Examine the special services and prayers of Great Lent. The Pre-Sanctified Liturgies, the Akathist Hymn, and the Canon of St. Andrew are integral parts of the Lenten liturgical life. Talk about the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim [see above], fasting, and the themes of the Sundays before Lent and during Lent. All of these are part of our preparation for Pascha.

Many resources are available to help you: Sunday bulletins, the parish library, your Priest or Church School Director. If you have access to the internet, check out the Orthodox web sites on the World Wide Web. <http://www.theologic.com> can get one to most anywhere in the Orthodox Christian world! Books like **Great Lent** and **Of Water and the Spirit** by Alexander Schmemmann, **The Lenten Spring** by Thomas Hopko, **The Lenten Workbook** [OCEC], the **Orthodox Study Bible**, and others, are available from Light & Life Publishing. [4818 Park Glen Rd. Minneapolis, MN 55416, Phone: 612-925-3888, Fax: FAX 888-925-3918]

Step 3: Focus on the children's response to the message of Great Lent.

Then answer the question, "How will we prepare for Pascha this year during Great Lent?" Decide what you will do as a family and what you will do individually.

Fasting

For example, parents and teens may choose a more rigorous level of fasting, but everyone in the family will fast at some level. The Church offers a rule to which we strive: no meat, fish, wine, dairy products, olive oil. (Wine and olive oil are permitted on Saturdays and Sundays.) The degree to which we keep the rule comes with spiritual growth and practice, but it can begin when children are young. In our home the girls learned to fast from meat during Great Lent while in the primary grades or younger. Our hardest problem was getting them to eat meat after Pascha!

But fasting is not limited to food. Throughout the writings of Church Fathers and Mothers, we read that we must also "fast from the tongue": watch what comes out of our mouths as well as what goes into the mouth. This requires as much effort, at times, as does fasting from food.

There's also "fasting with the arms and legs": keeping from any evil action; and "fasting with the eyes": protecting ourselves from what is out there that's not edifying. I remember sitting in the doctor's office, flipping pages of a magazine and my eyes were accosted by a provocative ad; or zipping through TV channels and viewing a music video, movie preview, or any of a number of other images that are unnecessary, i.e., that pull me away from Godly thinking. Anyone who has experienced a trauma in life can tell you that the visual images are always a part of one's memory. Our minds, like video recorders, amass millions of visual and audio "bits of memory" that can be recalled even when one wants to forget.

Worship

Great Lent is the time to increase your family's frequency of receiving the Eucharist, if it is not already your practice. If your family has never attended a Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, decide together to attend, and even to prepare to receive the Eucharist. Preparation to receive the Eucharist includes prayer, fasting and the Sacrament of Confession.

Many Orthodox parishes offer the Akathist on Fridays, whether it be the one to the Theotokos [Greek style] or alternating between the Akathists to Jesus and Mary [Slav style]. In our parish we also pray for the souls of our deceased family members after the Akathist [Slav style]. How appropriate! We are remembering and preparing for Christ's resurrection, so that we can indeed have everlasting life with Him, which is what we pray our family members are experiencing. If your parish offers this latter service, have the children help you with the list of names of Orthodox family members so that they can listen for them when they are read.

In nearly all our parishes, there are Saturday-of-the-Souls Liturgies where we again pray for the dead. Greek style: the two Saturdays before and the first Saturday of Great Lent. Slav style: the second, third and fourth Saturdays of Great Lent. Plan to participate and to bring your list of names to at least one. If it is the practice to prepare a special bread or boiled wheat for memorials, involve your children in the preparation.

Almsgiving

Save money individually or as a family to donate to a local charity or the Orthodox Christian Mission Center [P.O. Box 4319, St. Augustine, FL 32085-4319, Phone: 904-829-513]. The Mission Center offers a collection box that can be the visual focus of your effort.] Children can be encouraged to save from their allowance, gift monies, special treats, or lunches. Families can donate monies they would have spent for movies, video rentals or eating out. In either case, some sacrifice is to be involved.

Prayer & Study

Turn off, or at least, limit the television. This will provide time for prayer and the study of a book of the Bible as a family. The footnotes and special articles in the **Orthodox Study Bible** are of great help. With elementary-aged children use the **International Children's Bible**. There are several books in the *Arch Series* that deal with the Paschal story. Plus there are videos. Some families I know watch only "religious" videos or ones with a moral theme during Great Lent. Consider using this new-found time to play games such as *Bible Pictionary* [Sr. or Jr.], *Bibleopoly*, and Bible trivia games. [Check your local Christian book store for most of these items.] In a society such as ours that underestimates the value of discipline and obedience, the teachings and practices of the Orthodox Church appear as antiquated and "unnatural". From our perspective this is "the norm"! As St. Paul reminds us, we are to "live in the world" but not be "of the world." Christ wants us to "transform" the world around us. This Lent, strive to live "the norm."

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