

My Beloved,

March is the month of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary. At the same time, March is **always** part of Great Lent. This is no coincidence. Our Church Fathers intentionally placed the Feast of Annunciation 4 days after March 21st (the vernal equinox, which marks the beginning of Spring), and Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon of Spring AND after the Jewish Passover (a rule set by the 1st Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 AD). This is because both Annunciation and Easter are related to the **rebirth of nature**. Rebirth, not necessarily only of the nature around us, but more importantly, **rebirth of our own nature**. Yet, this rebirth inside of us does not happen without effort. It requires imitating Christ in **fasting** for 40 days. It requires **giving to charity** the money we save by eating less. It requires **praying** more often by attending the **Lenten services** we have **Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 6:00 PM** during most of March and April. Finally, it requires **confessing** our sins. This is **not** done “directly” to God or to an icon, both of which are non-Orthodox AND non-Roman Catholic approaches to this Sacrament, but to St. Peter’s successors, the Bishops and their priests, as our Lord explicitly instructs us in **John 20:23** and **Matthew 16:19**, and **James 5:16**! Please do not skip Holy Confession. You are free to confess to any Orthodox priest here in America or the world! So, please find a confessor/spiritual father you are comfortable with and take this important and salvific step of opening your heart to him.

On the day of **Annunciation**, the Virgin Mary agrees to give flesh to the Word of God in the person of the historical Christ Jesus. On the day of **Easter**, Jesus Christ becomes the first man who escapes from the snare of death - He becomes **the first-born of Hades!** But, was Jesus the first one resurrected according to the Holy Bible? He was not! There are **six** resurrections recorded in Scripture prior to Jesus’ – not counting the Holy Men resurrected in Jerusalem at the time He gave up His Spirit on Holy Friday. What is different with His Holy Resurrection though, is that all previous resurrections were temporary. That is, those resurrected received their old bodies and that meant they had to die again later. Jesus, however, did not and will not taste death again. His body at His Resurrection is not the same body he had while He was teaching. His Holy Body remains physical but yet exalted, which is represented by a blue halo on Byzantine icons. This means it is forever liberated from death. **“Death no longer has dominion over Him”** (Rom. 6:9). Something He promised will also happen to our own bodies at the General Resurrection.

With the **Annunciation**, our Panagia Theotokos, the Most Holy Mother of God, becomes a bridge connecting heaven and earth. She is helping God descent on earth, so all men can ascent to heaven. On **Easter**, the Son of God, who became Son of Man, breaks the bondage of man to **eternal death** the serpent setup on the Tree of Life. After His Holy Resurrection, death becomes temporary. After His Holy Resurrection, death is only a sleep - a sleep which will be interrupted by the Archangel’s voice and the trumpet of God announcing the Lord’s glorious return.

Annunciation and Easter! Two gateways to eternal life with a spring aroma. Two invitations to change our own nature. Two opportunities to use the time of Great Lent for bodily and spiritual transformation through **fasting, almsgiving, prayer, repentance**. Two occasions to **attend more church services**, to **receive Holy Communion more often** and to **confess our sins**. Blessed Great Lent to all!

With Love in Christ, Your Parish Priest, Fr. Gregory