

Saint Mina Retreat Center



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THE PURPOSE OF THE GREAT FAST

It might surprise some of us that the Church considers us spiritual “catechumens” during the 55 days of the Great Fast. Historically, a catechumen was a non-Christian who desired to join the Church and so entered into a period of religious education and spiritual preparation which was from forty days to eight weeks long. He would go to the main church of the city to hear a series of lessons (catechisms) from the bishop on biblical and doctrinal issues, and engage in a series of exercises which taught him how to pray and fight the good fight. If the catechumen was deemed worthy and ready, he was baptized by the bishop on the night before the Resurrection Feast—Bright Saturday—and he received his first communion with the body of believers during the feast itself.



Today, the catechumenate as a body is virtually gone; most of were baptized into the church as infants, and those adults who desire to be baptized are given a private course of religious education rather than a public one with other aspiring converts. Yet, the Great Fast brings us back to a point of beginning every year. For is not it our experience that we tend to forget and neglect the blessings and rights of our baptism day after day? We have been made children of a King, sons of a heavenly Father, co-heirs with Christ, and temples of the Holy Spirit—a priceless birthright! But we appear so similar to outsiders; the light of Christ does not shine through us.

So the Church invites us every year to “start over”, to take the first step again on the difficult road to perfection (Matthew 5:48). All the virtues we desired so earnestly to cultivate but felt we could not, we may begin again to pursue; all the sins we desired to uproot but felt we could not, we start again to eradicate. Roman Catholics have a nice custom of “giving up” one special pleasure during what they refer to as Lent, be it television, beef or even sugar. Our fasting is more comprehensive and ascetic, in accordance with our monastic roots; yet we can choose to “give up” a particular habit or weakness in addition to the Church’s rites on the Holy Great Fast. Why not forego complaining for these 55 days? Or abstain from peevishness, sarcasm, unkindness, laziness—any of a host of the small problematic traits that work to undermine our spiritual growth.

The entire Great Fast effort can indeed be summed up in that all-embracing word, “repentance”. It is the decision to make our future greater than our past, in order that we might enjoy God’s presence and love more intimately. For His presence has a special warmth and peace; and we are often far off, where the cold distance between us chills our spirits into a dejected torpor. The Great Fast—if experienced rightly, and not just as an inconvenient diet modification—can light the fire beneath us and throw us into a mode of action and service which will arouse our desire for God. The road is long and the effort strenuous; but at the end awaits the calming solace of Pascha, and the enduring joy of the Glorious Resurrection.

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RECOMMENDED READING



The reading recommended for the Holy Great Fast is, “**The Life of Repentance and Purity**” by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.

This book is divided into six parts in which His Holiness explains the life of repentance. It begins with defining what is repentance and the struggles we are faced upon. The book focuses on the incentives of repentance. His Holiness explains: “Our repentance needs to be built on a sound foundation, on true understanding of the spiritual life and our relationship with God. The most important motive for repentance is to know our own worth for each of us to know his own capabilities and who he is. So, my brother, know yourself.”

His Holiness continues to the means of repentance by guiding us on how to repent. We need to sit by ourselves for true self-examination and avoid justification for our sins and procrastination for the life of repentance. Reassessing our behavior and staying away from sin are part of the methodology of repentance. Thus seek our Lord Jesus Christ for obtaining the power to live a righteous life.

His Holiness also addresses the signs of repentance or the fruits of the penitent. A variety of emotions encountered leading to a life of humility and spiritual fervor. Repentance is a life-changing event. “Repentance is not merely confession and Holy Communion; it is leaving sin to walk positively in the life of righteousness.”

His Holiness concludes with the purity of heart and protecting repentance. One of the signs of a perfect repentance is the purity of heart. We need to acknowledge that to live the life of repentance it is important to repent continuously as a preservation of keeping the light of our Lord Jesus Christ within our hearts.

INTERESTING FACTS

40 Days and 40 Nights

by Fr. Shenouda Maher

The early Coptic Church tradition was to fast the Great Fast for forty days beginning Tobe 12, the day after the Feast of Epiphany, according to the Biblical tradition that our Lord set by fasting forty days and forty nights after His baptism.

However, since the Paschal Fast was fasted separately, Pope Demetrius, the 12th Patriarch, in agreement with Agapius, bishop of Jerusalem, Maximos, Patriarch of Antioch, and Victor, Patriarch of Rome, agreed to join the two fasts. Thus, the beginning of the Great Fast was determined by the date of the Feast of the Resurrection. Later, the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea commissioned the Patriarch of Alexandria to announce these dates in his Festal Letters to the other Sees.

The exact period of fasting for the Great Fast had differed amongst the different Churches during this period of time. For example, the Church of Alexandria fasted for six weeks according to the Festal Letters of St. Athanasius and was last documented in 577 A.D. On the other hand, the Church of Jerusalem fasted for eight weeks as documented in the Pilgrimage of Egeria. At least from the time of Pope Benjamin (622-661 A.D.) the Church of Egypt fasted a total of eight weeks. This is most likely due to the common pilgrimages of the Copts to the Holy Land, thus bringing back with them the tradition of fasting for eight weeks as well as the influence of St. Severus of Antioch (c. 465-538) who lived in Egypt during his exile and was beloved by the Copts. He spoke of eight weeks of five days each to yield the number forty which was the same computation as mentioned by Egeria. This calculation is the result of strict abstinence from food during the five days in the week but not on Saturday and Sunday.

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS: ON LOVE

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together. Men will take up arms and even sacrifice their lives for the sake of this love. St. Paul would not speak so earnestly about the subject without serious reason; why else would he say, ‘Wives, be subject to your husbands, and two the Lord.’ Because when harmony prevails, the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbors, friends, and relatives praise the result. Great benefits, both families and states, are thus produced. When it is otherwise, however, everything is thrown into confusion and turned upside down.

ST. MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR: The person who loves God cannot help loving every man as himself, even though he is grieved by the passions of those who are not yet purified. But when they amend their lives, his delight is indescribably and knows no bounds.

ST. SILOUAN: A certain monk told me that when he was very sick, his mother said to his father, “How our little boy is suffering. I would gladly give myself to be cut up into pieces if that would ease his suffering.” Such is the love go God for people. He pitied people so much that He wanted to suffer for them, like their own mother, and even more. But no one can understand this great love without the grace of the Holy Spirit.

ELDER THADDEUS: It seems that we do not understand one thing: it is not good when we return the love of those who love us, yet hate to those who hate us. We are not on the right path if we do this. We are the sons of light and love, the sons of God, His children. As such we must have His qualities and His attributes of love, peace, and kindness towards all.



FASTING...

It is possible for one who fasts not to be rewarded for his fasting.

How? When indeed we abstain from foods, but do not abstain from iniquities; when we do not eat meat, but gnaw to pieces the homes of the poor; when we do not become drunkards with wine, but we become drunkards with evil pleasures; when we abstain all the day, but all the night we spend in unchastened shows.

Then what is the benefit of abstention from foods, when on the one hand you deprive your body of a selected food, but on the other offer yourself unlawful food?

~ **ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM** ~

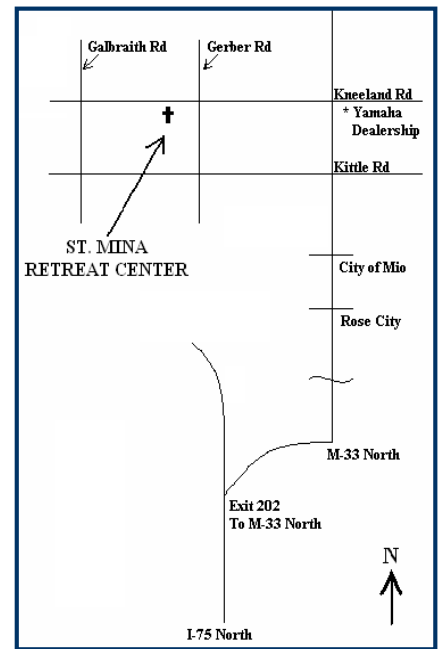
Blessed are those who have mercy
Who give to the poor and fast and pray
The Holy Spirit will fill their hearts
The Son will show them mercy on Judgment day.

UPCOMING RETREATS AT ST. MINA'S – 2016

- April 11–13 Middle of the Month Retreat
- May 23–25 Middle of the Month Retreat
- June 2–4 Group Retreat
- June 21-22 Feast of St. Mina

WHAT'S NEW AT ST. MINA'S RETREAT CENTER...

On the weekend of March 8th, a large group gathered at the retreat center to celebrate the feast of St. Pope Kyrillos. In these photos you'll find families coming together in unity. *"When two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in the midst of them"* Matthew 18:20. Surely, our Lord was among the families visiting. May the prayers and intercessions of St Mina and St. Pope Kyrillos be with us all.



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