

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). Repentance is the most basic component of an Orthodox Christian lifestyle. It is the key to Christian discipleship & spiritual formation. It is the foundation of building up the Church. Before we can be entrusted with philanthropic work, before we undertake evangelism and catechesis, and before serving on the parish council, it is assumed that we are all living lives of Christian discipleship (i.e. repentance). Indeed, repentance is our first priority, the spring from which all else flows in our Christian life. This brings us to the question of repentance. Repentance is when we realize we are not where we are supposed to be. Like the prodigal son, we have wandered far from our Father’s house. More specifically, we are created by God after His image and likeness. Because of our sins, this holy image is distorted in us. Yet, it is not obliterated. The Great Fast is the time when we imitate the prodigal son by coming to our senses and begin the journey back to the Father’s house. The beginning starts with coming to terms and realizing the type of human being I really am. But often, I am not aware of the depth of my own sinfulness. Sure, I recognize that I am a sinner but this is often limited to my surface sinfulness. I do not know this in depth. The *Great Canon of St. Andrew* sum up my predicament.

“The Gospel is unpracticed, the whole of the Scripture is ignored by you; the Prophets and every word of the Just have lost their power. Your wounds, my soul, have multiplied, and there is no physician to heal you.” The prayers of the Church challenge me to go deeper and see the sinfulness underneath the surface of my respectable life. And yet, the prayers do more than help me see the ugliness of my sins. Again in the words of the *Great Canon*: “I am bringing before you examples from the New Scriptures, my soul, to lead you to compunction. So emulate the righteous and avoid following the sinners, and regain Christ’s grace by prayers, fasts, purity and reverence.” The *Great Canon* reveals to me that “my heart conceals within itself not only sin and death, but also the possibility of repentance and renewal in response to God’s grace. The real genius of the Church’s liturgical tradition is that it takes me even deeper into myself and shows me the image of God that is obscured by my sinfulness. It is at that point, when I see my life as it has come to me from the Hand of God that I can begin, by God’s grace, the upward climb that is the life of repentance and theosis. The paradox is that I cannot ascend unless I first descend into the weakness that characterizes my life. A blessed lent and a glorious Resurrection. Fr. Michael

