

By the mercy of God Almighty

John X

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

to

My brothers, Pastors of the Holy Church of Antioch,

My sons and daughters, everywhere across this Apostolic See:

Dear brothers and beloved spiritual children,

At the threshold of the holy Forty Days, the Church stands with us. Through the preparatory Sundays that precede Great Lent, she calls us to become a bridal chamber for the heavenly Bridegroom, Christ our God. At the threshold of this Forty-Day Lent, the Church stands with us and reminds us that God wants us to be a chamber adorned with the humility of the Publican, the repentance of the Prodigal Son, with care for our brother in humanity, and with longing for the Paradise that was lost through pride and arrogance.

With the preparatory Sundays that precede Great Lent, the Church guides our steps and calls us to cast off the pride of the Pharisee and to imitate the humility of the Publican in the Gospel parable. She calls us to knock at the door of God's compassion with the modesty of the Publican and with his confession of sin, not with the insolence of the Pharisee who exalted himself even before God.

In the same spirit, she leads us to contemplate the parable of the Prodigal Son who departed from God and lived in sin. Yet the bitterness of sin restored within him the sweetness of living in his Heavenly Father's house. His Father, in turn, opened to him the arms of compassion.

From these two Gospel parables, she then leads us to hear the voice of the Judge on this Sunday: "For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came

unto me.” It is as though she is telling us that God desires mercy more than all other rites and practices.

From these Sundays, she appears to us on the final Sunday to address the Paradise lost by Adam, lost by each one of us, as if to say: Return, O human, to the paradise of your soul, which you find first and foremost in the sweetness and peace of Christ. Make yourself a bride for that heavenly Bridegroom, who refuses to dwell except in souls ruled by humility, inhabited by repentance, and in which mercy is manifested in deeds and not merely in words.

With the beginning of Great Lent, we pray to Christ, bowing to Him the knee of both our soul and body. We open to Him the doors of our souls and address Him thus: O Heavenly Bridegroom, come and be with us as we sail in life as our ship is battered by the waves of this troubled world. Be with us, O Lord, and secure the sail of our souls, that it may not be torn away by the winds of this world, nor confused by the falsehood of its might. Be with us, O God, grant peace to us and to Your world, and by the power of Your silence still the deceitful noises of this world, entangled in its selfishness and passions. Be with us and grant peace to our souls, to our homes, and to our countries.

Anoint with the oil of Your divine consolation all who are in distress, hardship, or illness. Bless and protect our children and our families. Have mercy on us and on Your world, and receive into Your mercy the souls of those who have gone before us to the place of Your holy light. For You are blessed and glorified unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Damascus, February 15, 2026.