

Date: March 3, 2026

Subject: BURL-Choir Saint Gregory Palamas Weekend NOTICE

Dear Friends!

This Saturday/Sunday, the second of Great Lent, the Church commemorates Saint Gregory Palamas.

The attached Tropar / Kondak text sheet contains the special prayers that will be sung.

This Friday / Saturday, the Church will continue Great Lent Memorial services.

Brief summaries about the Saint Gregory Palamas and commentary on Memorial Saturdays of Great Lent are provided below.

(Note: unless otherwise indicated, all dates are “old style”.)

**** SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS

Saint Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica, was born in the year 1296 in Constantinople. St Gregory's father became a prominent dignitary at the court of Andronicus II Paleologos (1282-1328), but he soon died, and Andronicus himself took part in the raising and education of the fatherless boy. Endowed with fine abilities and great diligence, Gregory mastered all the subjects which then comprised the full course of medieval higher education. The emperor hoped that the youth would devote himself to government work. But Gregory, barely twenty years old, withdrew to Mount Athos in the year 1316 (other sources say 1318) and became a novice in the Vatopedi monastery under the guidance of the monastic Elder St Nicodemus of Vatopedi. There Gregory was tonsured and began on the path of asceticism. A year later, the holy Evangelist John the Theologian appeared to Gregory in a vision and promised him his spiritual protection. Gregory's mother and sisters also became monastics.

After the demise of the Elder Nicodemus, St Gregory spent eight years of spiritual struggle under the guidance of the Elder Nicephorus, and after the latter's death, Gregory transferred to the Lavra of St Athanasius. Here Gregory served in the trapeza, and then became a church singer. But after three years, Gregory resettled in the small skete of Glossia, striving for a greater degree of spiritual perfection. The head of this monastery began to teach Gregory the method of unceasing prayer and mental activity, which had been cultivated by monastics, beginning with the great desert ascetics of the fourth century: Evagrius Pontikos and St Macarius of Egypt.

During his stay at Glossia Gregory became fully imbued with the spirit of hesychasm (the process of intense inward prayer) and adopted it as an essential part of his life. In the year 1326, because of the threat of Turkish invasions, he and the brethren retreated to Thessalonica, where he was ordained to the holy priesthood.

St Gregory combined his priestly duties with the life of a hermit. Five days of the week he spent in silence and prayer, and only on Saturday and Sunday did he come out to his people. He celebrated divine services and preached sermons. For those present in church, his teaching often evoked both tenderness and tears. Sometimes he visited theological gatherings of the city's educated youth, headed by the future patriarch, Isidore. After he returned from a visit to Constantinople, he found a place suitable for solitary life near Thessalonica the region of Bereia. Soon he gathered here a small community of solitary monks and guided it for five years.

In the 1330s events took place in the life of the Eastern Church which put St Gregory among the most significant universal apologists of Orthodoxy, and brought him great renown as a teacher of hesychasm.

About the year 1330 the learned monk Barlaam had arrived in Constantinople from Calabria, in Italy. He was the author of treatises on logic and astronomy, a skilled and sharp-witted orator, and he received a university chair in the capital city and began to expound on the works of St Dionysius the Areopagite, whose "apophatic" ("negative", in contrast to "kataphatic" or "positive") theology was acclaimed in equal measure in both the Eastern and the Western Churches. Soon Barlaam journeyed to Mt. Athos, where he became acquainted with the spiritual life of the hesychasts'. Saying that it was impossible to know the essence of God, he declared mental prayer a heretical error. Journeying from Mount Athos to Thessalonica, and from there to Constantinople, and later again to Thessalonica, Barlaam entered into disputes with the monks and attempted to demonstrate the created, material nature of the light of Tabor (i.e. at the Transfiguration). He ridiculed the teachings of the monks about the methods of prayer and about the uncreated light seen by the hesychasts.

St Gregory, at the request of the Athonite monks, replied with verbal admonitions at first. But seeing the futility of such efforts, he put his theological arguments in writing. Thus appeared the "Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts" (1338). Towards the year 1340 the Athonite ascetics, with the assistance of St. Gregory, compiled a general response to the attacks of Barlaam, the so-called "Hagiorite Tome." At the Constantinople Council of 1341 in the church of Hagia Sophia St Gregory Palamas debated with Barlaam, focusing upon the nature of the light of Mount Tabor. On May 27, 1341, the Council accepted the position of St Gregory Palamas, that God, unapproachable in His Essence, reveals Himself through His energies, which are directed towards the world and are able to be perceived, like the light of Tabor, but which are neither material nor created. The teachings of Barlaam were condemned as heresy, and he himself was anathemized and fled to Calabria.

But the dispute between the Palamites and the Barlaamites was far from over. To these latter belonged Barlaam's disciple, the Bulgarian monk Akyndinos, and also Patriarch John XIV Kalekos (1341-1347); the emperor Andronicus III Paleologos (1328-1341) was also inclined toward their opinion. Akyndinos, whose name means "one who inflicts no harm," actually caused great harm by his heretical teaching. Akyndinos wrote a series of tracts in which he declared St Gregory and the Athonite monks guilty of causing church disorders. The saint, in turn, wrote a detailed refutation of Akyndinos' errors. The patriarch supported Akyndinos and called St Gregory the cause of all disorders and disturbances in the Church (1344) and had him imprisoned for four years. In 1347, when John the XIV was replaced on the patriarchal throne by Isidore (1347-1349), St Gregory Palamas was set free and was made Archbishop of Thessalonica.

In 1351 the Council of Blachernae solemnly upheld the Orthodoxy of St Gregory Palamas' teachings. But the people of Thessalonica did not immediately accept St Gregory, and he was compelled to live in various places. On one of his travels to Constantinople the Byzantine ship fell into the hands of the Turks. Even in captivity, St Gregory preached to Christian prisoners and even to his Moslem captors. The Hagarenes were astonished by the wisdom of his words. Some of the Moslems were unable to endure this, so they beat him and would have killed him if they had not expected to obtain a large ransom for him. A year later, St Gregory was ransomed and returned to Thessalonica.

St Gregory performed many miracles in the three years before his death, healing those afflicted with illness. On the eve of his repose, St John Chrysostom appeared to him in a vision. With the words "To the heights! To the heights!" St Gregory Palamas fell asleep in the Lord on November 14, 1359. In 1368 he

was canonized at a Constantinople Council under Patriarch Philotheus (1354-1355, 1364-1376), who compiled the Life and Services of the Saint.

**** MEMORIAL SATURDAYS OF GREAT LENT

Saturday is the day which the Church has set aside for the commemoration of faithful Orthodox Christians departed this life in the hope of resurrection to eternal life. Since the Divine Liturgy cannot be served on weekdays during Great Lent, the second, third, and fourth Saturdays of the Fast are appointed as Soul Saturdays when the departed are remembered at Liturgy.

In addition to the Liturgy, kollyva (wheat or rice cooked with honey and mixed with raisins, figs, nuts, sesame, etc.) is blessed in church on these Saturdays. The kollyva reminds us of the Lord's words, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). The kollyva symbolizes the future resurrection of all the dead. As Saint Simeon of Thessalonica (September 15) says, man is also a seed which is planted in the ground after death, and will be raised up again by God's power. Saint Paul also speaks of this (I Cor. 15:35-49).

It is customary to give alms in memory of the dead in addition to the prayers we offer for their souls. The angel who spoke to Cornelius testifies to the efficacy of almsgiving, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God" (Acts 10:4).

Memorial services for the dead may be traced back to ancient times. Chapter 8 of the Apostolic Constitutions recommends memorial services with Psalms for the dead. It also contains a beautiful prayer for the departed, asking that their voluntary and involuntary sins be pardoned, that they be given rest with the Patriarchs, Prophets, and Apostles in a place where sorrow, suffering, and sighing have fled away (Isaiah 35:10). Saint John Chrysostom mentions the service for the dead in one of his homilies on Philippians, and says that it was established by the Apostles. Saint Cyprian of Carthage (Letter 37) also speaks of our duty to remember the martyrs.

The holy Fathers also testify to the benefit of offering prayers, memorial services, Liturgies, and alms for the dead (Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, Saint John of Damascus, etc.). Although both the righteous and those who have not repented and corrected themselves may receive benefit and consolation from the Church's prayer, it has not been revealed to what extent the unrighteous can receive this solace. It is not possible, however, for the Church's prayer to transfer a soul from a state of evil and condemnation to a state of holiness and blessedness. Saint Basil the Great points out that the time for repentance and forgiveness of sins is during the present life, while the future life is a time for righteous judgment and retribution. Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and other patristic writers concur with Saint Basil's statement.

By praying for others, we bring benefit to them, and also to ourselves, because "God is not so unjust as to forget your work and the love which you showed for His sake in serving the saints...".