



St. Mary & St. Anthony Coptic Orthodox Church

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF FASTING

by: Rev. Fr. Michael Sorial

The word “fast” means not eating all or certain foods. As Orthodox Christians, we fast at special times of the year, certain seasons of our life and especially each time before receiving Holy Communion. Fasting typically means to limit the number of meals, the amount of food and / or the type of food that is eaten.

The purpose of fasting is to bring to us the reality of Scripture that “Man does not live by bread alone.” Although, we often feel that “*we will die*” if we do not eat, the truth that we are to grasp in the spiritual discipline of fasting is that without eating of the “Tree of Life”, Christ Himself, *we really will die*. In the Coptic Rite of the Litany of the Gospel, the priest says “You (Christ) are the life of us all”. In fasting we more fully realize this truth that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). The first sin of our parents, Adam and Eve, was eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (*Genesis 3:1-19*). As we fast from food, we should also remember that we are to fast from sinning and doing evil. Although, many reasons are given for fasting, the truth is that these reasons are more so the fruits of fasting, rather than the reason itself, as indicated above. Some of these benefits, or fruits of eating from the fruit of tree of Life rather than the food of this world, include ease in prayer, compassion for the poor and hungry, as well as self-control.

Likewise a Christian must remember that there is no food that is ritually clean or unclean. Jesus said, “The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these are the things that make a person ritually unclean” (Mt. 15:18). Fasting, however, is more than not eating food. Saint John Chrysostom teaches that in fasting we ought to also fast from sin. For example, besides controlling what goes into our mouths, we must control what comes out of our mouths as well. Are our words pleasing to God, or do we curse God or our brother? The other members of the body also need to fast: our eyes from seeing evil, our ears from hearing evil, and our limbs from participating in anything that is not of God. Most important of all, we need to control our thoughts, for thoughts are the source of our actions, whether good or evil.

What is Lent?

Great Lent consists of six weeks (40 days), which correspond to the 40 days that Christ fasted in the desert overcoming temptation by Satan. The period of Lent is preparation for the annual commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, celebrated during Holy Pascha Week. It precedes Palm Sunday, Pascha Week, and Bright Saturday, which all culminate at the Feast of the Resurrection. There is an additional seven days of fasting before the beginning of the Great Lent, which have come to serve as a “preparatory period”. It is, however, not a part of the fast of the Great Lent itself. Although, much has been said about this preparatory week of fasting being for the purpose of “making up for the Saturday’s of Lent” which we do not fast on, this idea is pharisaical, convoluted and foreign to the theological spirit of the Orthodox Church. Other theories suggest that this week of fasting began as a promise from the Christians made to Emperor Heraclius in the 7th century to fast for him. Heraclius had promised the Jews peace after becoming victorious over Jerusalem in 628. Prior, the Jews and Persians had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed its churches and killed its Christians. Some suggest that Heraclius was then persuaded to break his promise of peace for the Jews, and in return, a week of fasting would be conducted for him each year.

According to one source, “Heraclius experienced a most exquisite triumph as he knelt in the rebuilt church to receive the blessings of the patriarch that extraordinary day. Apologists would say afterwards that only because of the adamant demands of the patriarch and the local clergy did the Emperor rescind his pledge of amnesty and reluctantly authorize the forced baptism and massacre of

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the Empire's Jews.”¹ A Greek Scholar, O.H.E. Burmester, who studied and taught in Egypt during the 1950's who wrote the same story in his book, "The Egyptian or Coptic Church: a detailed description of her liturgical services and the rites and ceremonies observed in the administration of her sacraments". However, it must be said that many believe this theory to be dated and historically inaccurate. Although research has not brought a consensus for the reason of this pre-Lenten week of fasting, it has come to be utilized as a week where the faithful Orthodox Christians prepare themselves, mentally, physically and spiritually for the fast.

Generally speaking, fasting is an essential element of the Christian Life. Christ fasted and taught men to fast. But the Christian must remember that fasting is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Our goal is an inner change of heart. The Lenten Fast is called “ascetic.” This refers to actions of self-denial and spiritual training which are central to fasting, which is a spiritual exercise. It is not imposed or forced upon us. In the same way that true repentance cannot be forced upon anyone, each of us makes the choice to turn away from our sinful ways and go toward our loving, forgiving Father in Heaven. It is in the season of Great Lent that we take upon ourselves a time of preparation for the feast of the Resurrection of Christ, the living symbol of man’s entire life which is to be fulfilled in his own resurrection from the dead with Christ. As a time of renewed devotion: of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, it is a time of repentance, a real renewal of our minds, hearts and deeds in conformity with Christ and his teachings. It is the time, most of all, of our return to the great commandments of loving God and our neighbors. At its very heart, as we hunger for the Bread of Life, we find our souls and bodies being liberated from sin, the renewal of our love for God and man, and the enlightening of our entire being for communion with the Blessed Trinity.

Principles Regarding Lenten Fast & Abstinence in the Orthodox Church

In order to help in your Lenten Fasting, the following is a brief description of the Lenten Fast with regards to the foods and times of abstinence of foods. The purpose of this is to help educate you on fasting and abstinence in general. It is important for you and your family to participate in the "spirit of the law", working this out with your family and your priest for your salvation.

Foods Abstained From During Lent

Meat Products, Dairy Products (includes butter, eggs, milk, cheese, etc., as well as items containing), and Seafood

Foods Eaten During Lent

Vegetables, Vegetable products (including grains [rice, wheat, flour, pasta {non-egg pasta}, etc.] vegetable gelatins, etc.), and Fruit

Weekdays during Lent

During this period, we regulate both the amount of food we consume as well as the frequency of eating. No food is usually eaten between meals; and at meal times, smaller quantities than normal are eaten.

Saturdays, Sundays and Feast of the Annunciation (April 7) during Lent

On Saturdays, Sundays and the Feast of the Annunciation during the Great Fast, the quantity and frequency of meals is not restricted.

Contemporary Matters Regarding Fasting

Additional consideration should be given to the consuming nature of social networking, web surfing, television watching, texting and other forms of electronic satiation. To get the most out of the season of Holy Lent, faithful should consider reducing and/or eliminating aspects of these electronic stimuli. These stimuli often serve as “little foxes” (SOS 2:15, NKJV), robbing the contemporary Christian of the necessary time of reflection, which leads to the desired goal of an inner change of heart.

¹ David Lewis. *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215*, publisher Norton, 2008: p.69



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“Total Package” Principles for Fasting in the Orthodox Church

Fast: What time will I not eat or drink until? _____

Abstinence: What I will withhold? _____

Divine Liturgy: Which Divine Services will I celebrate? _____

Sin: What sin(s) will I seek victory over? _____

Habits: Which “little foxes” will I reduce/eliminate during this season? _____

Prayer: What times of day will I commit to prayer? _____

Almsgiving: What acts and/or donations will I commit to? _____

Scripture: How many chapters from the Bible will I read per day? _____

Spiritual Book(s): Which spiritual book(s) will I read? _____

Begin: Date and time I will start _____

End: Date and time I will stop _____

Goal: I am fasting to _____

Bible Basis: My Bible promise is _____

In light of my fast, I need to make the following changes in my life: _____

God being my strength and grace being my basis, I commit myself to the above fast.

Signed

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Patristic Texts

Fasting is a medicine. But medicine, as beneficial as it is, becomes useless because of the inexperience of the user. He has to know the appropriate time that the medicine should be taken and the right amount of medicine and the condition of the body which is to take it, the weather conditions and the season of the year and the appropriate diet of the sick and many other things. If any of these things are overlooked, the medicine will do more harm than good. So, if one who is going to heal the body needs so much accuracy, when we care for the soul and are concerned about healing it from bad thoughts, it is necessary to examine and observe everything with every possible detail

Fasting is the change of every part of our life, because the sacrifice of the fast is not the abstinence but the distancing from sins. Therefore, whoever limits the fast to the deprivation of food, he is the one who, in reality, abhors and ridicules the fast. Are you fasting? Show me your fast with your works. Which works? If you see someone who is poor, show him mercy. If you see an enemy, reconcile with him. If you see a friend who is becoming successful, do not be jealous of him! If you see a beautiful woman on the street, pass her by.

In other words, not only should the mouth fast, but the eyes and the legs and the arms and all the other parts of the body should fast as well. Let the hands fast, remaining clean from stealing and greediness. Let the legs fast, avoiding roads which lead to sinful sights. Let the eyes fast by not fixing themselves on beautiful faces and by not observing the beauty of others. You are not eating meat, are you? You should not eat debauchery with your eyes as well. Let your hearing also fast. The fast of hearing is not to accept bad talk against others and sly defamations.

Let the mouth fast from disgraceful and abusive words, because, what gain is there when, on the one hand we avoid eating chicken and fish and, on the other, we chew-up and consume our brothers? He who condemns and blasphemes is as if he has eaten brotherly meat, as if he has bitten into the flesh of his fellow man. It is because of this that Paul frightened us, saying: "If you chew up and consume one another be careful that you do not annihilate yourselves."

You did not thrust your teeth into the flesh (of your neighbor) but you thrust bad talk in his soul; you wounded it by spreading disame, causing unestimatable damage both to yourself, to him, and to many others.

❖ **John Chrysostom**

'Let each one of us keep in mind the benefit of fasting... For this healer of our souls is effective, in the case of one to stop the fevers and impulses of the flesh, in another to assuage bad temper, in yet another to drive away sleep, in another to stir up zeal, and in yet another to restore purity of mind and to set him free from evil thoughts. In one it will control his unbridled tongue and, as it were by a bit, restrain it by the fear of God and prevent it from uttering idle and corrupt words. In another it will invisibly guard his eyes and fix them on high instead of allowing them to roam hither and thither, and thus cause him to look on himself and teach him to be mindful of his own faults and shortcomings. Fasting gradually disperses and drives away spiritual darkness and the veil of sin that lies on the soul, just as the sun dispels the mist. Fasting enables us spiritually to see that spiritual air in which Christ, the Sun who knows no setting, does not rise, but shines without ceasing. Fasting, aided by vigil, penetrates and softens hardness of heart. Where once were the vapors of drunkenness it causes fountains of compunction to spring forth. I beseech you, brethren, let each of us strive that this may happen in us! Once this happens we shall readily, with God's help, cleave through the whole sea of passions and pass through the



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waves of the temptations inflicted by the cruel tyrant, and so come to anchor in the port of impassibility.

❖ **Symeon the New Theologian**

'In proportion as the body grows fat, so does the soul wither away.'

❖ **Daniel of Sketis**

"The Saviour began the work of our salvation with fasting. In the same way, all those who follow in the footsteps of the Saviour build on this foundation the beginning of their endeavor, since fasting is a weapon established by God. ...the human race knew no victory before fasting, and the devil was never defeated by our nature as it is: but this weapon has indeed deprived the devil of strength from the outset. Our Lord was the Leader and the first example of this victory, in order to place the first crown of victory on the head of our nature. As soon as the devil sees someone possessed of this weapon, fear straightway falls on this adversary and tormentor of ours, who remembers and thinks of his defeat by the Saviour in the wilderness; his strength is at once destroyed and the sight of the weapon given us by our Supreme Leader burns him up. A man armed with the weapon of fasting is always afire with zeal. He who remains therein, keeps his mind steadfast and ready to meet and repel all violent passions."

❖ **Isaac the Syrian**

Let us thus engage in the holy fasts, as having been prescribed by Him, and by means of which we attain the way to God.

❖ **Athanasius of Alexandria**

Fasting...is the first commandment that God has delivered unto mankind, when He commanded our forefathers Adam and Eve that they should not eat certain fruits in the Garden. And fasting was the first deed that our Lord and Master Jesus Christ did after being baptized, even before He started His preaching ministry among the people. And fasting was the first deed that our fathers the Apostles did when the Bridegroom was taken from them. And while they fasted and prayed the Holy Spirit spoke unto them (Act 13:2). Fasting is the weapon by which we defeat the devils, for the Lord said, "This kind goes not out but by prayer and fasting." (Mat 17:21).

❖ **Pope Kyrillos VI**

A PRAYER FOR LENT

The Prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian is traditionally said many times throughout each day during Great Lent, in addition to our daily prayers.

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, faintheartedness, lust of power, and idle talk. (+)

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to your servant. (+)

Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sin and not to judge my brother, for You are blessed from all ages to all ages. Amen. (+)

(The "(+)" indicates that those praying make a deep bow or prostration at this point.