

Pastoral Letter – “Let us begin the Fast with joy”
Sunday, March 17, 2024
The Sunday of Cheese-fare

Dear Friends in Christ:

By God’s grace, and entrusting ourselves to the prayers of the most-holy Theotokos and to those of our patron St Nicholas, we begin the Great Fast this Sunday evening during the service of Vespers. This will be a busy time in church. And of course, in addition to the services, we know that this period of forty days is marked by intense fasting. Since some have asked me about how to go about this, I want to offer a few reflections on what I will call **the rules** and **the rule** of the Great Fast.

Beginning with **the rules**: For many of us, when we think about ‘the rules’ of the Fast, we think about eating: what may we eat or not eat? Starting with the first week, many Christians have traditionally kept the first five days of the first week with special intensity. Some fast from all foods on these days, breaking this period of non-eating only to take two small meals (one after the Presanctified Liturgy served on Wednesday, and the other after the Presanctified Liturgy served on Friday). For practical reasons, it is obvious that most of us will not be able to keep this discipline (nor should most of us even try). Still, even if most of us should not attempt this kind of severe fasting, there is a principle to take from this traditional discipline. That principle is this: Especially in this first week, we should be very serious and intentional about what we are doing so that we establish good habits for the rest of the forty days. Passing on from the first week: according to Tradition, after the first week we keep subsequent weeks less rigorously, but still with strictness. We do not consume meat, dairy products, or eggs. We do not consume fish (except on Annunciation and Palm Sunday). We do not consume oil or wine except on weekends, or when there is a relaxation of the Fast for some reason (these days are marked on the calendar). The rules subsequently became more rigorous for Holy Week again.

What should this fasting regimen look like for us who live and work and study in the world? Invariably, in light of the different kinds of responsibilities that we might have, or in light of the health challenges that we might face, or in light of our previous experiences in fasting, what is feasible for any one of us at this particular moment will look different from what others might do. But here is where what really becomes essential to keep in mind is what I want to call **the rule** of the Great Fast.

What are we to take away from the traditional **rules** of the Fast? What is **the rule**—the principle—that undergirds them? It is this: **simplicity**. Above all, the Great Fast should be a time of putting aside the things that distract us so that we can focus our inner lives more on the Lord God. This is one of the main reasons for the traditional fasting rules: If we follow them, we are forced to eat simpler meals that require less preparation time. In practice, this principle is sometimes obscured in light of how many recipes for vegan food are now available (many of them requiring just as much preparation time as non-Lenten foods). But even if we might make use of some of these, we must also be careful not to lose sight of what the traditional practices were meant to do: Namely, to inculcate a spirit of simplicity so that, instead of being distracted by the concerns of everyday life (e.g., figuring out how to sate our appetites with tasty things), we might learn to focus on our relationship with God.

Passing from food to life in general (because, after all, this is what the fasting practices are meant to do—to teach us about how to live our lives in Christ more generally), the same should be true of everything that we do during the Great Fast: During this time, we should aim to do everything with the spirit of simplicity and humility that the Lord teaches us in the Gospel. For that reason, beyond eating, during this time we must be very attentive to take stock of the other things in our lives that

cause us to become distracted from God, and we must be diligent in working to correct them. By way of making some suggestions, here are some practices for consideration.

1. During the Great Fast, we should do everything that we can to cultivate silence and stillness in our lives. To that end, we should refrain from idle entertainment as much as possible. TVs at home, radios in the car, social media, online streaming services, incessant emails: all of these might have some place in our lives, but all too often they are there simply to fill time that could otherwise be spent in quiet and stillness, or they simply waste our time, distract us from reality, or (worst of all) incite our passions in ways that are toxic to our souls. During the Great Fast, then, we should go without these things as much as we can. Of course, some engagement will be inevitable if we must use them for work or school purposes. But we should be strict—even ruthless—in cutting them out whenever we can.

2. As we become more intentional about cultivating this spirit of stillness, we will find something happening within us: The less that our hearts are distracted by the chaos of things out there, the more that we will be able to face ourselves and evaluate our spiritual lives honestly. And we need this to happen (painful though it can be at times) so that we can begin to do what this season is all about: embracing the spirit of repentance. As part of that process, everyone needs to participate in the sacrament of confession during the Great Fast. We should not delay in preparing for this. Rather, we should start getting ready for this sacrament as soon as possible by setting aside time to do a true, honest self-evaluation of our lives, by diligently reviewing an examination of conscience, etc.

3. As we pray and fast during this time, we must not forget the importance of the fact that this season is prefaced by the Sunday of the Last Judgment. What I mean by that is this: As the forty days continue, it can sometimes become easy to get wrapped up in the services and questions of eating or not eating that we forget that, ultimately, neither prayer nor fasting will have any real power if these activities are not accompanied by almsgiving. Why? Here, words from *2 Clement* (a work from the mid-2nd century) are instructive: “Almsgiving is as good as repentance from sin. Fasting is better than prayer, but almsgiving is better than both.” Fasting and prayer without almsgiving do not work, simply put, because it is the most important spiritual activity of these three. So then: yes, we must indeed fast from food. But, if done truly, fasting must always lead to good works done in love for the sake of our brothers and sisters. And in fact, this theme is echoed throughout the Fast, since many of the liturgical hymns insist that true fasting entails doing what is good for our brother and renouncing what is evil.

4. Beyond anything else that we do to put on the spirit of simplicity and humility that is the goal of this season of repentance, we should always keep in mind the most important rule of this season. To summarize the words of a bishop-monk whom I once encountered: The most important rule of fasting is that each of us should look at his or her own plate—i.e., each of us should be attentive to what *we* are doing, not meddling in the practices and struggles of others (cf. the Prayer of St Ephraim).

As we begin these forty days, I wish you all a season of grace. “Let us begin the Fast with joy,” and let us pray for one another during this time, that we may both begin the Fast well and persevere in it to the end, until we celebrate together the great night of the saving Pascha of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr Mark Therrien".

Fr Mark Therrien
Rector, St Nicholas Orthodox Church