

FASTING FOR NON-MONASTICS

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INTRODUCTION

Your Eminence, Your Grace, Reverend Fathers and Brothers!

First I must apologize. In the presence of our brother-monastics and senior clergy, clearly, I should be learning from those with much more experience and knowledge in the subject of fasting, instead of pretending that I have something to say as I will attempt to do next.

A curious phenomenon can be observed in the interactions between pastors and their parishioners at the beginning of each major fast of the Church. Pastors attempt to call their parishioners' pious attention to the spiritual heights of fasting: the fighting against sin, the conquering of passions, the taming of the tongue, the cultivation of virtues. In turn, parishioners pester their pastors with purely dietary questions: when fish is allowed, whether soy milk or soy hotdogs are Lenten foods, whether adding milk to coffee is breaking the fast, or whether there is some dispensation that can be given to the young, the elderly, those who study, those who work, women, men, travelers, the sick, or those who simply do not feel well. In response to the overwhelming preoccupation with dietary rules to the detriment of the spiritual significance of fasting, some pastors, seemingly out of frustration, began to propose in sermons and internet articles that dietary rules are not important at all: if you want yogurt during Lent, just have some as long as you do not gossip; if you want a hamburger, then eat one, as long as you do not devour a fellow human being by judging and backstabbing. Unfortunately, such advice rarely helps eradicate gossip, judging or backstabbing. Rather, it seems to confuse people into thinking that since they have not yet conquered these and many other vices in their hearts, they do not have to fast from hamburger either. Thus, I would like us to discuss the very topic which fascinates so many lay people: what the fasting rules are and how they are to be followed by those of who have not taken the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

The Rules, the Rules, Let Us Attend

So, what are the fasting rules? Most of us refer to a calendar we buy at a church kiosk to tell us what to eat and what not to eat on any given day. But where do the people who print the calendar get their information? Where does it really say how to fast? Well, you may have heard the Russian saying about not going to someone else's monastery with your own rules. The fact is that fasting as we have come to know it nowadays is derived primarily from a monastic discipline, and fasting rules come from monasteries. The rules we use in the Russian Orthodox Church today, for example, largely come from the Monastery of Saint Sabbas near Jerusalem. There are several paragraphs in chapters 32 and 33 of the Typicon which outline the rules of fasting. The second source of fasting rules that can be identified is the tradition of the Great Church of Constantinople. This is how we get the mention of shellfish, which is found not in the Typicon but the Nomocanon. There are also some local variations—usually relaxing the fast—that have to do with

either memories of saints or life in northern climates. The Solovki Monastery, for example, is quite a bit north of the Monastery of Saint Sabbas; not too many vegetables grow there year round, but fish is plentiful. Yet most of us do not live in Solovki or Alaska.

And so, according to the Typicon, on Monday and Tuesday of the first week of Great Lent, no food is allowed at all. On Wednesday of the first week, bread and warm (or cooked) vegetables are served once—and that is the only meal on that day. And those who cannot keep such a strict fast, such as the elderly, may eat some bread after vespers on Tuesday. The rest of Great Lent is less strict: some bread and vegetables are allowed once a day every day after vespers. And “if any monk destroys the holy Lent through his gluttony by eating fish on days other than the Feast of the Annunciation and Palm Sunday, may he not partake of Communion on Pascha.” That is the rule.

Physiologically, it is quite feasible for an average human of average health to observe the strictest fasting rules for at least the first week of Lent as well as the Passion Week a month later. In fact, an average person can go completely without any food but only water for a week or so with no ill effects to his or her health—it is only a matter of will power. It is true that catabolic processes begin within 16-24 hours from the last meal, but unless one is in the business of growing meat on their bones—such as a bodybuilder—the effects would be minor. Averaging fewer than 500 calories a day for 49 days, however, or for 250-some days year after year—the approximate number of days we fast each year—may in fact have ill effects on the health of our parishioners—if not for the lack of calories, then for the lack of basic nutrients.

Lebanese Lenten food

Does anyone actually follow these rules? I presume some do—probably some monastics and a very small number of lay people. But if you see a monk having breakfast or lunch on any weekday during Great Lent, you may assume that the said monk is modifying the rules somewhat to suit his particular needs or wants. In fact, most lay people and many monastics follow some modified version of the rule which is almost never a stricter version of the fast, but rather a relaxation of it—whether increasing the number of meals, or the amount of food, or the type of food, or all of the above. For example, at the Moscow Theological Academy and Seminary, located on the premises of the Holy-Trinity Sergius Lavra near Moscow, students and staff eat fish throughout Great Lent—not only on the two feast days mentioned in the Typicon. In recent years, fish is served twice a week on most weeks, but in the not-so-distant past, it was served as many as four times per week. Likewise, those who read the diary of Tsar-martyr Nicholas II will note that fish was served to the Royal Family throughout Great Lent. And this is not something that somehow started in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Patriarchal “Feeding Chronicle” of the 17th century, for example, recorded an abundance of fish dishes served to the Patriarch and his guests on every Saturday and Sunday during Great Lent. [1]

One question immediately arises: why do they need fish? Indeed, many Orthodox Christians follow the monastic rule and eat fish only on the feasts of the Annunciation and Palm Sunday—and they seem to do just fine. And I am not at all convinced that the seminary students would receive worse grades or have a more difficult time studying without fish. But it would seem that eating fish on all Saturdays and Sundays of Great Lent, while contrary to the monastic rule of Saint Sabbas, is well within the tradition and historical praxis of the Russian Church for both laymen and clergy alike. Of course, those who are both able and desirous to keep a stricter fast should be encouraged and guided toward the stricter discipline. But there seems to be something inherently wrong in an approach to fasting in which a vegan triple chocolate cake is somehow Lenten, but a can of tuna is not. The cake may indeed be “kosher” but it is hardly Lenten. We will return to this point.

Is It a Sin to Break the Fast?

So, is it a sin to break the fast? The answer to this question depends on what is meant by breaking the fast. As we have discussed, it turns out that most people—monastic and lay alike—deviate from the rule in some way. If this deviation is meaningful and its purpose is to accommodate a real physiological need, then, it seems to me to be well within the spirit of fasting, even if it is not exactly according to monastic rules. If, however, the deviation is due to our gluttony, laziness, lack of discipline, or some other weakness, then we have something that should be corrected. Perhaps, the best way to think about sin in relation to fasting is not in legal terms—law, crime, and punishment, but in terms of preparation or exercise. Fasting is an ascetic discipline. The word “ascetic” comes from the Greek *ἀσκησις* which means “exercise” or “training.” In other words, imagine that you are a soldier preparing for a difficult and dangerous mission. It is not so much a crime to be lazy in your training or to cut corners as much as it means that you may not be well-prepared for your task and thus will not be able to complete it or even perish in the process. So, if people choose not to exercise the discipline of fasting, they are cheating themselves out of the training necessary to fight against the enemy—sins and passions—and will be unprepared to face the snares of the devil.

THE CONCEPT OF FASTING

The Discipline of the Body

There are two aspects to the exercise of fasting that I would like to discuss. The first one is the discipline of the body. Any time something is limited in its freedoms, it becomes subject to whatever force is limiting it. So, when I make my body do what I need instead of what it wants, I become its master. In other words, if I tell my feet to walk and where to go, or if I tell my hands to work and what to do, or if I tell my brain to solve a problem and which one—I gain control over this incredible gift of God called my body. On the other hand, if my body forces me to do what it wants, then it becomes my master. And it would not, perhaps, be so bad if the body wanted what was best for me. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Each person has his or her own vices yielding to our fallen nature, but in general, we know that given a choice, our body does not always choose wisely: it wants to be lazy rather than productive; it wants to eat junk food rather than healthy food; and our brain just wants to party or get into mischief—often to the detriment of the body.

All of this may sound simple enough, but what are we talking about? What is the body, and who is it that is supposed to be in charge? The dichotomy of body and soul is not within the scope of our talk, but for simplicity’s sake, let us agree that when we say “body,” we mean the whole of our nature: flesh, including brain, emotions, desires, will, intellect, etc. And the “you” is the hypostatic you, that which tells your brain to solve a math problem and the brain obediently solves it, it is the “I” in “I love you,” and it is the “my” in “my name is...” But it so happens that in English, when we say “body” we often refer to the physical body. This is not, however, the biblical use of this word.

Thus, the discipline of the body is exercised for the purpose of keeping one in charge of his body. In our fallen state, the natural order of our being has been perverted: the flesh with its passions and desires is the ruler of our being; our mind is a slave of the flesh and is preoccupied with figuring out how to fulfill the desires of the flesh; the soul feeds on the passions of the flesh, looking for pleasure and never finding satisfaction; and the spirit—the direction in which our entire being moves—is not that of God, but rather of corruption, waste, and destruction. In other words, the human spirit, the vector, is missing its true mark, which is God. In Christianity, this is known as “sin,” or *ἁμαρτία* in Greek, which translates as “missing the mark” or “mistake.”

Fasting, then, helps us restore the divinely ordained order to our being: the spirit or vector must always point to God, the soul must find its fulfillment in communion with God, and the body, in all of its complexity, must serve the soul in its service to God. We may, and will, talk about meat, fish, shrimp and the like, but the main point is: if you cannot be in control of your stomach, if this simple sack of flesh is the ruler your life, how can you hope to be in control of more complex physiology, or your mind, or your soul?! This is not even a purely religious matter but a matter of being a human being. I once heard some teenagers bragging about breaking a fast as if it were some accomplishment to eat a hotdog or bacon on a fasting day. In reality, it is simply the mark of an individual who lacks self-control and is ruled by his gut—nothing at all to brag about. If I were that person, I would not advertise this embarrassing infantile quality and try to work on developing more self-discipline.

Unity with the Church

Photo: <http://peterpaul.sobor.ca/>

The second aspect of fasting that I would like to mention is the unity of the Church which is the Body of Christ. Fasts and feasts of the Church create a certain kind of unity among its members. Think of your family: relatives have meals together, celebrate important events together, and stick together during sad times. This helps maintain cohesion and unity within the family, and if anyone decides to abstain from family life, then he or she is essentially cutting themselves off from the family. It is the same in the Church: we keep fasts together and we celebrate feasts together as a family of God. And if anyone decides not to fast together with the Church or not to join the Church family in festal celebrations, then they are separating themselves from our family, cutting themselves off from the Body. And if you do not want to join your brothers and sisters in this short temporal life, how do you plan to spend eternity with them? Our faith is not individualistic; it is not about one solitary person being saved in some solitary way. Salvation is possible only in the Body of Christ, and only as a member of that Body. A branch which is cut off from the vine no longer inherits life but is thrown into a burn pile.

FASTING AND PHYSIOLOGY

But enough theory and theology! This talk is supposed to be about practical things. Let us assume that everyone here believes in and tries to follow the spiritual path which is offered to us by Orthodox Christianity, and that we all know that this path necessarily includes the discipline of the body, a small part of which is the discipline of that sack of flesh called the stomach. So, what do we know about this organ? All too often people come to me and say that they cannot fast because they need protein. When I ask them questions and try to figure out why they think that they need more protein than most other Orthodox Christians who observe the fast, it turns out that these people rarely have a good idea of how much protein their body really needs, or which foods contain protein and how much, or what else they may need besides protein. In most cases, these people simply want that hotdog, they want that hamburger, and they want that cheese sandwich, and that is the only reason they say that they need protein. So let us take a closer look at our bodies' real needs.

This is not a college course on human physiology, so we will keep things very simple. When it comes to food, our bodies basically need three things: carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. Also vitamins and minerals, of course, but people usually do not complain that they do not get enough vitamins during a fast—even if they really do not get enough—but that is for a different reason, which has nothing to do with fasting. A varied diet which is plentiful in such foods as whole grains, raw green vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and fresh fruit should provide enough vitamins, calcium, iron, and other necessary elements.

The amount of carbohydrates, protein, and fat that a person needs depends on the person's age, gender and lifestyle. But before we get into the exact amounts, let us first very briefly discuss what these nutrients do for us.

Carbohydrates

Our body is a marvelous and complex organism created by God. It is usually a mistake to think of our body as a mechanism or a machine, but to simplify our discussion, let us use some mechanical language when talking about nutrition. In the simplest terms, in order to operate, our body needs fuel. If we do not have enough fuel in our body, then the body slows its metabolism—the rate at which it burns fuel—and begins to shut down non-essential work, making one feel tired and sluggish. Carbohydrates, such as oatmeal, buckwheat, or rice, serve as a good source of this fuel. But most people who are following a fast do not typically have a problem with getting enough oatmeal or buckwheat. Some people, of course, do have a problem with eating too much highly processed and refined starch, such as white bread, white pasta, etc., and not enough of the good complex carbs like oatmeal or buckwheat; but, just as with vitamins, this is not related to the fasting rules, as such people may have a poor diet whether or not they are fasting. In fact, some people have complained to me that they gain weight during Lent. And by looking at their diet, which contains huge amounts of pasta, white bread with slabs of margarine, and salads drowning in fatty dressing—it is easy to see why they do. Add to this a regular helping of “Lenten” desserts overloaded with sugar, and your Lent becomes a dangerous experiment in trying to see how much junk your body can endure before it begins to break down.

Fats

While we are on this topic, how much fat do people need? Depending on the total number of calories you need per day (this number is calculated based on your age, gender, and level of physical activity), you may be able to safely consume up to 100 grams of high-quality fats (although, for many of us, half of that amount or less—30-40 grams—should be sufficient). High-quality fats are, for example, good (non-refined and not heated) olive oil, coconut oil, nuts, or fish, but not lard, butter, or margarine. Good fats serve many functions in the body—from protecting the cardio-vascular system, to helping the brain, to making sure that joints work well.

Protein

Finally, we get to the main concern of many people who are looking for an excuse not to fast—protein. According to the National Academy of Sciences, adult females need an average of 46 grams of protein per day, and adult males –52. These numbers may vary depending on your size, but not necessarily your current weight. For example, if you weigh 200 pounds, but you really should weigh only 150, then your protein intake is calculated based on your ideal weight and not the extra weight you carry. The amount of protein intake also depends on your level of activity: if you exercise every day, you probably need a little more; if you spend your days sitting in an office, in your car, in your favorite arm chair, etc., then you probably need a little less. We will discuss some of these situations in due course, but for now, let us just average the number to 50 grams per day and see how we can get that much protein on a Lenten diet.

On days when fish is allowed, you can actually get good animal protein without too much trouble. 2 oz. of cold-smoked salmon (lox) has approximately 13 grams of protein. A serving of canned fish—salmon or tuna—has the same. By the way, one can usually equals to 2 or 3 servings. So, if you eat a whole can of tuna, you get 36 grams of protein. And for those who choose to follow the Greek custom of eating shrimp, it also contains approximately the same amount of protein—12 grams of protein per 50 grams of shrimp. Remember that a serving—2 oz. or approximately 60 grams—is a pretty

small amount. In America, we are used to eating a lot more than one serving of anything. Two small servings of fish or shrimp contain half the daily amount of protein for an adult male.

Among other common fasting foods, peanut butter has 7 grams of protein per 2 tablespoons, rice, buckwheat, and oatmeal—approximately 6 grams per one cup of cooked product, good bread (not the white fluffy chemical kind)—6 grams per slice, a cup of cooked beans or lentils—15 grams (that's more protein than a serving of fish), 20 almonds (a handful)—5 grams. In other words, if you have a cup of oatmeal and a peanut-butter sandwich for breakfast, a cup of buckwheat and 100 grams of fish for lunch, and a cup of rice and bean mix for supper, you get 62 grams of protein—a bit more than an average adult male needs. I understand that many people do not like math and find these calculations confusing and incredibly boring, but just think about it: one does not really have to try hard to get enough protein on a Lenten diet.

What about complete and incomplete protein? In order to understand this difference, we must understand how our body processes protein. When we eat a piece of meat, for example, our body does not take that meat and strap it directly to the biceps (even though that would be nice). Instead, it disassembles the protein contained in meat into small building blocks called amino acids and then reassembles those amino acids into protein for the human body. In addition, our body can create many of the amino acids from all sorts of building blocks found in many foods, but there are eight amino acids that our body is not able to create. Foods that contain these eight essential amino acids are said to have complete protein; foods that do not contain all eight are said to have incomplete protein. Meat, to be sure, does contain all eight, but so does fish, a mixture of beans and grains (such as rice), or quinoa. Quinoa is a grain that contains all eight essential amino acids—and that is 6 grams of complete protein per cup of cooked product.

As you can see, it is very much possible to get more than enough protein on a simple fasting diet. Nutritionally, there is absolutely no reason why reasonably healthy people should not be able to abstain from meat, eggs, or milk for a period of time. People have practiced fasting for thousands of years—since well-before the incarnation of Christ. Psychologically, we may be craving a hotdog or ice-cream, but this craving has nothing to do with our bodies' nutritional needs.

Let us now take a look at some special circumstances in our lives, and how we can observe the fasts of the Church while studying, working, exercising, travelling, etc.

FASTING FOR NON-MONASTICS

Fasting and Life's Seasons

Our life is not one uniform and monotonous continuum. Rather, it is a variety of seasons. Some easily come to mind—childhood, adulthood, old age—but there are others: pregnancy, for example, or preparing for an exam, or training for a competition, or travelling. We will touch on all of these, but let us begin with the natural seasons of our life: childhood, adulthood, and old age.

Most of us probably know that infants, with the exception of Saint Serguis of Radonezh, do not fast. It is said that the baby Serguis (whose name was Bartholomew before he became a monk) refused his mother's milk on Wednesdays and Fridays, but even in this miraculous account we do not read that he abstained from milk during longer fasts, of which there would have been four in his first year of life. There is a limit to how long a baby can go without milk.

At about the age of three, a young child may be taught the basics of self-control. At that age, there is still no need for a child to follow a monastic fasting rule, but even a three-year-old can be taught to give up a cookie on Friday.

From approximately seven years of age, children should be mostly eating what the parents eat, with perhaps some adjustments. And, of course, it is assumed that the family follows the fasts of the Church. A parent, for example, may experiment with eating only once a day after vespers, but a child probably should not—at least, not for forty-nine days straight. Even if a child wishes to try some stricter asceticism, a parent will naturally want to guide the child in ways that are age-appropriate.

Being a teenager or young adult is another one of life's seasons. This is a season of many stresses in life: school, sports, romantic relationships for which young people stay up half the night and then feel lousy for most of the next day. All of this makes it very difficult to add yet one more stressor. Fasting is a stressor. When one fasts, one has to exercise will power; one has to control oneself, limit one's appetite, and think ahead. But this season in life is also when young people really need to practice the skill of self-control and self-discipline. They are no longer children, and their parents are not always there to be their backbone. By now, they had better have their own backbone. This is why it is so important to begin fasting in some way and learning self-discipline when they are still young children.

Following the turmoil of the young adult years, roughly half the young people will get pregnant. The guys may think that this does not apply to them, but the new Affordable Care Act does cover pregnancy benefits for young men. So, fear not! Jokes aside, however, pregnancy had better not be a young woman's experience, but that of the couple. Care, love, support, understanding, and—yes!—cooking is what guys get out of this experience. There is absolutely no good reason for a pregnant woman to follow the monastic diet, and I am certainly not aware of any Church rules that say otherwise. One thing that I always say to pregnant women is that they still have to fast. We all do! But their fast is eating as healthily as they can, which is a discipline in and of itself. If it is healthy—eat it; if it is not—do not eat it, even if it does not contain meat or dairy. This does not mean that a pregnant woman should stuff herself on meat at every meal. This would not be healthy, especially if we are talking about processed meats full of sodium and nitrates. But the season of pregnancy is not the time for only bread and water after vespers. To be sure, there are plenty of vegetarians who never eat meat—not even during pregnancy—and deliver healthy babies who also grow up not eating meat. One does not have to eat meat just because one is pregnant. But neither does one have to follow a monastic fast.

Finally, most of us will grow old—40-or-so, or even older. This is a good season for a renewed focus on one's spiritual life. An older person may have more time for prayer, more opportunity for strict fasting. Certainly, the older people get, the more ailments they may have. But they will have those ailments whether or not they pray and fast. Watching television instead of praying, or eating hotdogs instead of fasting will not cure those ailments. In fact, it may add to them. Prayer and fasting, on the other hand, rejuvenate the soul and the body. In a recent study (2012), researchers at the National Institute of Aging in Baltimore discovered that strict fasting twice a week helps lower the risk of developing many brain diseases, such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's, and delays aging in general. While this is not why we fast, it is still nice to know that fasting is really good for our physical body. Lack of self-control and self-discipline, on the other hand, is really bad at any age.

All of this, of course, may be a long way away for some of us, or, at least, it may seem like it is a long way away. There is beauty and a tremendous spiritual benefit in living in the moment, in making today the day that counts, as if there were no tomorrow. But it is also important to “keep an eye on the ball” of our life, and to realize that what we sow today will have to be reaped tomorrow.

Fasting and Study

The most common thing that young people do in Western societies is study. In America, kids may study for twelve, sixteen, eighteen, twenty, or even more years. Is study compatible with fasting? Absolutely! But some adjustments to the fasting rule may be made, both due to age and also to the task of studying. It is well-researched and documented,^[2] for example, that breakfast is important for school performance. There is a simple explanation: if you eat supper at seven or eight o'clock in the evening, then by seven or eight in the morning you will have been fasting for twelve hours. If you do not break fast, then by lunch time, you will have been fasting for sixteen hours—this is when catabolic processes already begin. When the body does not receive fuel in the form of good complex carbs, it begins to slow its metabolism and shut down non-essential functions—one feels tired, sleepy, sluggish, and cannot think well or quickly, because the brain actually consumes approximately 20% of the total calorie intake. In other words, school children should not follow the monastic rule of eating once a day after vespers—at least, not for any significant length of time.

Also, as I mentioned before, some prominent seminaries and theological academies serve fish during Great Lent. If future priests and their instructors, many of whom are monastics, feel that they need fish because they study or teach, I believe that other students may benefit from the same. It certainly does not have to be a fancy lobster dinner, but if one feels that one may need a can of tuna on a “non-fish” day, this may be an acceptable practice.

It may also be the case that children are served lunch at school. It is difficult to observe all of the fasting rules when they have no control over what goes into their food. For example, they may be given a salad with some cheese or dressing that has dairy. In my view, it is better to thank God and to eat this salad than to go hungry or eat a bag of potato chips, which may be perfectly fasting from a legalistic point, but are certainly not healthy if a child is compelled to choose chips over salad for forty-nine days. Children can still abstain from meat even in school, and they can observe as strict a fast as they wish when they eat breakfast and supper at home. But it may be inevitable to make some allowances for school lunches and even better to pack one's own lunch.

Fasting and Work

Most people either have a job or are looking for a job. And yes, just like studying, all jobs are perfectly compatible with fasting. If the job is not very physically demanding, one can and should observe a stricter fast. If the job involves a lot of heavy lifting, or working outside in cold weather, or some other physically demanding task, one should probably increase calorie intake and relax some of the “no-oil” days. There is no “one-size-fits-all” advice, and one should strive to fast as strictly as one can. But if the job performance is suffering, then one should consider making some allowances and relax the fasting rule just enough to do the job well. In any case, I personally believe that everyone who has any important obligations in the morning—students, parents, workers—should not skip breakfast. Priests, of course, do not have breakfast before serving the Liturgy, and maybe that is why some of our sermons are not as good as they could be. Lay people should also observe the Liturgical fast whether they are preparing for Communion or not. But this is a special case, and a special time. In most other cases, in my opinion, a good, whole grain breakfast is the most important meal of the day and can solve many problems with “not feeling well” while observing a fast.

Fasting and Sports

Perhaps, the most difficult topic is fasting for serious athletes. It is important to emphasize that we are talking about serious athletes. A walk in the park or high-school P.E. do not constitute a serious athletic pursuit and do not require any relaxation of fasting rules. Likewise, we will not discuss Olympic-level athletes—their training is so strenuous that they often require a special strict diet and are not likely to be able to follow a monastic fasting rule. But what if one is seriously involved in high school or college athletics?

People who engage in physical exercise need two basic nutrients: carbs and proteins. Carbs are what fuel our muscles. During any physical activity, our muscles burn the carbs that are stored in them, and then during the period of recovery, the carbs in the muscles are replaced. If exercise is hard enough—and that is the only way to increase performance—our muscles actually get damaged (that is why we feel sore) and it takes protein to repair them. As our damaged muscles are repaired, they get a little stronger and bigger than they were before a workout.

In other words, it is nearly impossible to observe a monastic rule of bread and water after vespers and have regular hard workouts. To be sure, one can do it for a day or two, but not for forty or forty-nine days—athletic performance will suffer. So, in order to maintain athletic performance, one probably needs at least three good meals a day with plenty of complex carbs and 30 to 50% more protein compared to those people who lead a less active lifestyle. But one can still keep the fast. For example, one can completely abstain from meat. There are many successful athletes who are vegans and vegetarians (www.greatveganathletes.com). If people think that they absolutely have to have animal protein in their diet, fish is a much more Lenten choice than beef. One can get a lot of protein from many plant sources—the most strong and muscular animals on planet Earth are all herbivores. (Of course, the digestive system of those animals is very different from the human digestive system, but the Church is not calling us to only eat grass for the rest of our lives.)

Many athletes also feel that they need to take various supplements. Here, we will not discuss the wide variety of products that supplement companies are trying to sell to anyone who will listen to their advertising pitch, but people often ask about protein supplements, such as protein shakes or powders. In my opinion, such things as supplements, herbs, vitamins, etc., are not food and there is no good reason to worry too much about whether a capsule is made from gelatin or whether protein isolate was derived from whey. If someone absolutely has to take protein powder, it may be healthier for the body to take whey protein than soy protein. Such a person can still be very strict with his or her food: no ice cream or hotdogs (and if one is a serious athlete, one probably does not eat junk food anyway). But if they think they must take extra protein (and this is a big “if”), choose the healthiest option, which is probably not soy isolate.

However, the very idea of drinking a whey protein shake during Lent may bother you, and it probably should. There are plenty of people who live healthy, productive lives on a purely vegan diet. There are also many successful vegan athletes, including marathon runners, bodybuilders, Olympic sprinters, MMA fighters, cyclists, boxers, basketball players, football players, even strongman competitors and powerlifters, and many others who never eat any animal protein. They win championships and tournaments on a completely Lenten diet, proof that anyone should be able to observe a fast for forty-nine days. It will take some research and forethought, but one can absolutely be an athlete and observe the fast. The health benefits one gets from competitive sports are very important, but only for a few years or a few decades. The spiritual benefits one gets from fasting last for eternity. Everything should be put in its proper place: eternal things first, temporal—second.

Fasting and Travel

It is a common belief that people who travel are somehow exempt from fasting or that their fasting rules are relaxed. So, let us explore this issue a little further. In the past, people often travelled by foot, walking twenty or more miles each day and carrying their bags. They sometimes had to endure rain, sometimes snow, and sometimes heat. They even had to camp and sleep in the field or in the forest. Finally, they were unable to cook for themselves during their journey and had to be satisfied with whatever they could find along the way. Because of these hardships, fasting rules for travelers were relaxed—they needed more energy and could not be picky about their food.

Nowadays, travel is quite a bit different. We no longer walk very much, but usually travel in a comfortable, air-conditioned car, or in an airplane with reclining seats, with an iPod, iPad, or some other device which keeps us entertained. We do not walk for hours, instead we sit for hours, and we complain a lot. When it is time to make a stop, we no longer camp under an open sky or sleep on the hard, cold ground. Instead, we sleep in a hotel room with a comfortable bed, a shower, and a television set. And then we complain some more. This is not to say that travelling cannot be exhausting or uncomfortable. But it simply is not as exhausting or uncomfortable as it used to be.

One thing, however, remains pretty much the same—we cannot cook for ourselves very well while we travel and must be satisfied with the food that we can find along the way. In many cases, the solution is very simple: if we are taking a two-hour-long flight, we can eat a good meal before we leave home in order to avoid having to look for food at an airport. If we have a long flight or a long drive, we can try to pack Lenten food for the trip. If we end up needing to buy food, we should choose the healthiest, most Lenten option we can reasonably find. French-fries, while Lenten, are not necessarily the healthiest option. Often, we can find a salad, fruit, or a fish sandwich, or good bread with some vegetables. Whatever we choose may have dairy in the salad dressing or mayonnaise in the fish—and there is not much we can do about it, although, particularly here on the west coast of America, most reputable establishments offer vegan options. Let us thank God, enjoy our food, and continue with a stricter fast when the trip is over. But there is certainly no good reason to seek out opportunities to break the fast just because we find ourselves sitting at an airport waiting for an airplane. A relaxed fasting rule during travel is not a dispensation, it is an accommodation.

THE SPIRIT OF THE TYPICON

Many people seem to think that the Typicon forbids certain foods during Lent. They may, for example, assume that the Typicon forbids all animal products. This view is further advanced by clergy when we explain to our parishioners the basics of fasting. As shorthand, we may say that animal foods are not allowed during Lent, but all plant foods are allowed. This creates a Kosher-style approach to fasting, in which the fanciest vegan cakes and exquisite dark chocolates somehow become “Lenten.” Our pious Orthodox parishioners—much like pious Orthodox Jews—can be observed debating whether some ingredient is derived from an animal product and whether it is “kosher”—that is to say, Lenten. And much like in Kashrut, the focus shifts from the discipline of the body to the avoidance of certain ingredients for the sake of ritual purity. Fasting degrades into a religious vegan diet, in which some products become religiously unclean, while others are “kosher.”

Now, it must be noted here that this approach to fasting may be the only reasonable way to greet a hierarch, should he visit your parish during Lent. Offering a guest bread, pickles and water after sunset may not be the best strategy, especially if the guest is your ruling bishop. And our sisterhoods work very hard to express their love for our archpastors in whatever ways they can, including culinary ways. This is perfectly normal, and these are reasonable exceptions.

Of course, we all understand that the Typicon breathes very different air, an entirely different spirit. Not the spirit of slavery to the law of Kashrut, but a spirit of freedom from the desires of the flesh. Reading the Typicon, we may notice, contrary to popular belief, one very important thing: the Typicon does not contain any prohibition on any food. Unless we regard the remark about a monk “ruining” his Lent with fish as an indirect prohibition of fish, the Typicon actually does not prohibit any food or product whatsoever.

The Typicon assumes that when we fast we do not eat or drink anything at all. I will repeat: Lent, according to the Typicon, is a complete abstinence from all food and drink. It treats Lent not as a religious diet, in which some foods are “kosher” while others are not, but as an exercise in asceticism. Thus, the Typicon does not have to forbid any food, since none is eaten, nor any drink, since none is drunk. Instead, it allows certain things at certain times to offer us sustenance. So, on Tuesday of the first week of Lent, the Typicon allows those who are weak to have some bread and water after vespers. On all other days until Passion Week, the Typicon allows bread, water, and warm vegetables once a day. On Saturdays and Sundays oil and wine are allowed. In other words, the Typicon thinks better of us than we think of ourselves—it does not address gluttons with prohibitions, rather it addresses strict ascetics with allowances. We must keep this in mind when applying fasting rules to ourselves: am I a glutton who needs prohibitions, or am I in danger of fasting too strictly for my own good and should heed the Typicon? When understood improperly, the fasting rules of the Typicon can produce such aberrations as arguments that vodka is a Lenten product since it is made from grains or potatoes and is thus not forbidden by the Typicon. True enough, the Typicon does not forbid vodka, and neither does it forbid beef steak, for that matter, as it simply does not forbid anything at all, as it assumes that we want to better ourselves in the freedom of the New Testament, rather than enslave ourselves to the dead stone tablets of the old Law.

CONCLUSION

When we are young children, our parents tell us to do what is good for us. They give us rules to follow, and we follow them, but not because we realize what is good for us, but because those rules are imposed on us. When we grow older, we begin to understand what is good for us, and follow in that way freely. It is the same with the rules of the Church. When we are babies in the faith, we follow rules and canons often without a good idea why. But when we advance in spiritual age, we begin to understand that these are not some meaningless arbitrary rules, but a path to spiritual health and communion with God. With age come freedom and responsibility, and we find ourselves having to decide how rules apply in our lives and whether we are able to break them. But just as it is the mark of a child to obey rules without understanding what they do, it is also childish and immature to want to break rules just because one can.

Imagine that our parents tell us not to stick metal objects into an electric outlet; they may even slap our hand if we try. At a certain age, we will find that there is no one to stop us—we are old enough to do what we wish. And then we will discover that it is still a good rule not to stick metal objects into an electric outlet. Maybe our parents made us brush our teeth. When we are in college, our parents are not there to tell us to brush our teeth, but if we have any sense in us, we will do that on our own without being told to. And if we choose not to brush our teeth, we will not only offend others by the foul smell from our mouth, but will also allow our own teeth to rot.

Our loving mother Church gives us rules to follow. If we do not follow these rules, the result will be foul smell and decay in our soul. And thus, the task should not be to find as many excuses as possible for breaking the fast. Whether we are young or getting older, whether we work or study, whether we exercise or travel—Christians at all times in the history of the Church were both young and old, worked and studied, exercised and travelled, and kept the fast. The task should be to keep our faith, to discipline our body, and to grow in the Spirit in every situation and under all circumstances.

Fasting is only one aspect of our spiritual practice, but it is an important one. It is one of the two wings which help us rise to heaven. A bird with only one wing cannot fly; and a Christian who cannot control his belly does not have spiritual freedom.

Undoubtedly, you have heard these theoretical musings before. But I hoped to show that as a practical matter, fasting is very much possible in most, if not all situations. We must lead by example and decide that we will stop looking for reasons to break the fast and instead start looking for ways to keep

it; learn a new recipe or two, and resolve to exercise our will-power and self-discipline. We reap what we sow. Sow the good seeds of asceticism in your life, and you will reap freedom from slavery to your belly, freedom from the passions of the flesh, and a blessing of following in the footsteps of the greatest saints and our Lord Himself.

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[1] Seech. «Кормовая книга 7132-го года» in Писарев Н.Н. *Домашний быт Русских патриархов*. Kazan, 1904.

[2] The studies are both numerous and easy to locate. If you wish to learn more on this topic—just “google” it.