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The Lenten Fast: Its Rule and Spirit

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I- Historical Background

Fasting is not new in the Church. Fasting had its origin in the life of our first parents Adam and Eve. Fasting was the first, and only, law given to Adam and Eve¹.

The Old Testament provides an extensive record of fasts kept by the Jews as commanded by God² and fasts, without specific commandment, in times of distress, grief or when asking for forgiveness³.

In the New Testament, the Lord Himself fasted for forty days⁴. He commanded His disciples to fast after His ascension⁵ and prescribed fasting as a spiritual weapon against evil⁶. After Christ's ascension, the disciples continued to practice fasting, beside prayer, in every aspect of their apostolic lives⁷ and they handed down this tradition to their disciples to preserve and practice it after them.

The aforementioned scriptural examples of fasting inspired Christians to imitate them, thus fasting quickly became part of the regular Christian experience. Evidently, the earliest Christian documents show that fasting in the first five centuries took different shapes and passed through various phases of transformation until it evolved into its current form today.

The practice of fasting in the first and second centuries took the shape of complete abstention from food for a day or two⁸. During the third century, fasting was extended to a full week in preparation for Pascha (Easter). By the fourth century, fasting had transformed in form and length and had evolved from a one week preparation for Pascha into a forty day fast⁹.

In the year 330, as indicated by St. Athanasius in his Festal Letters, Lent had expanded to forty days and had taken on the symbolism of Jesus' fasting in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights.

Holy Week was instituted sometime after the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher by Constantine (335), giving a total of seven weeks¹⁰ of fasting; forming "Lent" in its current shape.

Lent was an exclusive spiritual training for the catechumens in preparation for baptism before Pascha. Gradually, the sponsors (Godparents), family and friends of the catechumens started to participate in the preparation process of the catechumenate¹¹. Therefore, fasting seven weeks prior to Pascha, "Lent" became a standard practice in the piety of the Church.

II- Development of Form and Rules of Fasting

As we noticed from its historical background, fasting gradually transformed from one or two day fast, in preparation for Pascha, to a full seven week fast, forming "Lent" as we know it today.

Christian fasting practices began expanding from their basic biblical roots in the early centuries of the church. In its first form, fasting was a complete abstention from food and drink until sunset. Later on, the Church established more rules pertaining to the length and the form of fasting, including a list of permissible and prohibited types of food¹² during fasting periods¹³.

Monastics in early Christianity incorporated fasting as an essential element of ascetic life. The monastic communities kept the rules of fasting intact. They observed fasting in its first form, which took the form of a complete abstention from food and drink until the sunset. After the sunset, monastics were able to eat a light vegetarian meal¹⁴.

Christians adapted ascetic principles as models of pious life and tried to imitate their practices, especially the practices of the heroic monastic figures in early Christianity. However, taking into consideration the differences between the normal life of a pious Christian and the strict life of monastics, the church adapted more elastic rules to encourage Christians to fast. Therefore, Christians (non-monastics) were allowed to eat vegetarian food any time during the day, all week days, with exception of Fridays and Wednesdays. On Fridays and Wednesdays, Christians were called to abstain completely from eating until the sunset, or until they receive the Holy Communion in the Presanctified Liturgy.

The following chart contains the rules of fasting as followed in our Antiochian Orthodox Church today. Before you observe and follow these rules, please remember:

1. These rules are means to an end. They are not an end by themselves.
2. The level of strictness in fasting is best worked out in each Christian's own setting and spiritual state of being, therefore laity must council their spiritual father, pastor, who will determine their appropriate level and strictness of fasting.
3. There are many exceptions to the rules given here, depending on the liturgical feasts that fall during Lent. Therefore, council your pastor, spiritual father, for details pertaining to exceptions.

Fasting rules as followed in our Antiochian Archdiocese	
Saturdays and Sundays of Great Lent	Abstain from meat, fish, dairy, eggs
Monday through Friday of Great Lent	Abstain from meat, fish, dairy, eggs, alcohol, oil
Feast of Annunciation of the Theotokos on March 25 of every year.	Abstain from meat, dairy, eggs. <i>Fish is allowed.</i>
Palm Sunday	Abstain from meat, dairy, eggs. <i>Fish is allowed.</i>

Please note that there are many more strict fasting rules that are followed in monasteries, where complete abstinence from food and drink takes place for a certain period of time. Laity are encouraged to imitate such practices but only under the observation and supervision of their spiritual father, pastor.

III- Fasting, the Spirit of the Rule

Generally speaking, fasting is a voluntary denying abstention from certain foods and drinks or both for a certain period of time. However, there is a clear contradistinction between fasting or “νηστεία” (nistia) and hunger or “λιμός” (limos)¹⁵. Fasting is not measured by how much hunger “λιμός” we endure. Even though hunger is an important factor in fasting, it is not enough by itself. In addition to physical hunger, we are called to recognize our spiritual hunger and seek to feed it with repentance, prayer and almsgiving.

Fasting isn't substituting certain kinds of foods for different kinds of food; like substituting fish for meat, soy milk for regular milk, non-dairy coffee creamer for dairy creamer, and the list goes on. Accordingly, fasting isn't only changing our food, but also changing the direction of our life and redirecting it back towards God.

Fasting is not only abstaining from meat and dairy products, rather, fasting is to live in austerity and renounce the worldly pleasures. By doing so, and we become more able to feel compassionate with those who are in need, we will be able to save our resources and give back to the poor and hungry.

Fasting isn't a virtue by itself. Fasting is a means to obtain virtues. We don't fast because it gratifies God when we don't eat for “the devil also never eats”¹⁶, neither do we fast because it gratifies God when we endure affliction and pain. Neither do we fast as an act of penance for our sins, because fasting is not a punishment; quite the opposite, fasting is a joyful act of love, through which we express our love, faith and obedience towards God.

Through fasting, we control our senses and our physical weakness from all that hinders the contemplation of God; and we become more free to commune with Him in prayer. St. Isaac the Syrian states: “Fasting, vigil and prayer are God's holy pathway and the foundation of every virtue.”¹⁷

Fasting without prayer becomes a bodily punishment, a physical diet or a false ritual, and likewise prayer without fasting loses its power and misses its goal. Fasting without effort in virtue is wholly in vain, and likewise it is impossible to acquire virtues without fasting and prayer, for to acquire virtues is to reacquire the divine likeness of God¹⁸.

Great Lent is a time for self-examination and self-denial. It is a time renew and fortify our relationship with God and others through works of mercy, charity, visitation of the sick and assistance to the unfortunate. Lent is a time when we get closer to our family, relatives and friends. Lent is a time to reconcile hostility and hatred; a time to forgive and forget; a time for a new beginning.

IV- Practical Remarks on Fasting Today

1. In no way should we fast in a manner to cause damage to our health or to an extent where we become unable to accomplish our daily tasks and work responsibilities.
2. Very young children, pregnant woman, elderly people, nursing mothers and individuals with certain medical conditions are exempted from strict fasting unless they are advised otherwise by their doctor. That being said, people in these groups are encouraged to abstain from some kinds of food one or two days of the week, as much as they can tolerate.
3. We should not fast “like the hypocrites”¹⁹, in a way to draw attention to ourselves. When we are invited to eat in others homes, we should accept what we are offered to eat raising no objections. If our fasting embarrasses others or causes them extra work, then our fasting has lost its value and missed its purpose.
4. In today’s Orthodox world, we spend a considerable amount of time and efforts, during Lent, trying to find tasty Lenten recipes, which are of gourmet status or duplicate meat dishes using textured soy protein. By doing so, we delude ourselves that we are keeping the Fast, and instead of using fasting as a spiritual cure it becomes a burden that adds to our estrangement from God.
5. Let us, then, fast not to fulfill a legalistic obligation, but to obtain the Holy Spirit of God and unite ourselves with our Savior. Let us take Lent as an opportunity to pause and meditate on the real meaning of fasting and its purpose.
6. Finally let us always remember, that fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are three elements that can’t exist apart from each other.

Certainly, nothing is more expressing of the real meaning of fasting than the words of Saint John Chrysostom stating:

“Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers? May He who came to the world to save sinners strengthen us to complete the fast with humility, have mercy on us and save us.”

Endnotes

- 1 *“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die”* Genesis 2:16,17
- 2 Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7; Zechariah 8:19
- 3 see Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Jonah 3:4–10; Psalm 35:11–13; 1 Kings 9:18
- 4 Mathew 4:2
- 5 Mathew 9:14,15
- 6 Matthew 17:21
- 7 Acts 14:23; Acts 27:33; 1 Corinthians 7:5; 2 Corinthians 6:5; 2 Corinthians 11:27
- 8 *“For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors.”* Epistle of St. Irenaeus to Victor: Philip Schaff, Rev. Henry Wallace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. I, p. 243
- 9 The first reference to a forty day fast is in the Council of Nicaea (325) in Canon 5: *“...And let these synods be held, the one before Lent, (that the pure Gift may be offered to God after all bitterness has been put away), and let the second be held about autumn.”* The fifth canon of Nicaea makes what looks like a passing reference to Lent, thus suggesting it was an established season by the year 325.

10 Between East and West the number of weeks of Lent differed, with seven weeks being established in the East and six in the West by the mid-sixth century. The reason for the difference in the number of weeks between East and West was because in the West Saturday was a fast day along with Wednesday and Friday, while in the East Saturday was not a fast day except the Saturday of Holy Week, according to the Canons of the Church (Canon 66, Apostolic Fathers; Canon 55A Sixth Ecumenical Synod in 692 - Canon 18, Gangra Synod in 340-370). See: Rev. George Mastrantonis, THE GREAT LENT - A Week by Week Meaning.

11 *"Those who believe in the truth of our teaching, first of all, promise to live according to that teaching. Then we teach them how to pray and entreat God with fasting for the forgiveness of their sins; and we the faithful pray and fast with them."* See: Sara Parvis, Paul Foster, Justin Martyr and his worlds, p. 154

12 *"The fast must not be broken on the fifth day of the last week in Lent [i.e., on Monday Thursday], and the whole of Lent be dishonored; but it is necessary to fast during all the Lenten season by eating only dry meats."* (Synod of Laodicea, Canon 50) See: Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, A Select Library of Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: The seven ecumenical councils, p. 155

13 *"If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or reader, or singer, does not fast the holy Quadragesimal (forty day) fast of Easter, or the fourth day, or the day of Preparation, let him be deposed, unless he be hindered by some bodily infirmity. If he be a layman, let him be excommunicated."* (Apostolic Canons, Canon 69) See: Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: The seven ecumenical councils, p. 598

14 *"St. Athanasius' classic depiction of Antony shows him eating bread and salt, with water, once a day in the evenings, and frequently foregoing these."* See: Robert C. Gregg, trans. and ed., Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus, Classics of Western Spirituality, p. 36

15 *"In hunger and thirst, in fastings often"* (2 Corinthians 11:27)

16 Lenten Triodion, Sunday of Forgiveness

17 St. Isaac the Syrian, Homilies 37, Ascetical Homilies, p. 171

18 St. John of Damascus wrote: *"The expression according to the image, indicates rationality and freedom, while the expression according to the likeness indicates assimilation to God through virtue."* See: Timothy Ware, The Orthodox Church, p. 219

19 Mathew 6:16

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