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The Meaning of Fasting in the Orthodox Church

by Fr. Milan Savich

Fasting is as old as the human race. Fasting was practiced by pagan religions, Judaism and Christianity, and it was generally considered an important element of religious life, although with different practices and understanding. In the ancient religions of the East fasting meant a complete abstention from food for a certain period of time — one day or more. The origin of fasting as a moral discipline, especially among the old pagan religions is very obscure, just as their understanding of God was inadequate and vague.

The monotheistic, God revealed religion of the "Chosen People" knew about fasting. From the Old Testament we learn that God instituted fasting in Paradise when He said: "But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen. 2:17) From this is clear that fasting existed before the "original sin" of Adam and Eve, and it was not ordered as a cure for their sin. The fasting in Paradise consisted of abstaining of certain food — namely of "the fruit of the tree." The tree of knowledge of good and evil was created by God as well as all other trees in Paradise and, as such, preceded the Satan and his sinful machinations. God's commandment to Adam and Even not to eat of the particular fruit was issued as a method of man's discipline of self-control and spiritual growth. This means that the first man in Paradise was not perfect, but was good and capable to improve and develop his spiritual and moral personality.

Fasting understood in this way was practiced both in the Old and New Testament and throughout the entire history of the Church. A noted Orthodox theologian Father Alexander Schmemmann, speaking about fasting in the Old and New Testament, saw a great similarity and interdependence between two events in the Bible — one at the beginning of the Old Testament and the other at the beginning of the New Testament. He writes: "The first is the 'breaking of the fast' by Adam in Paradise. He ate of the forbidden fruit. This is how man's original sin is revealed to us. Christ, the new Adam, — and this is the second event — begins by fasting. Adam was tempted and succumbed to temptation. The result of Adam's failure is expulsion from Paradise and death. The fruit of Christ's victory is the destruction of death and return to Paradise. It is clear, that in this perspective, fasting is revealed to us as something decisive and ultimate in importance. It is not mere 'obligation', a custom; it is connected with the very mystery of life and death, of salvation and damnation." St. Basil the Great, confirms the above statement by saying: "Because we did not fast, we were chased out of Paradise; let us fast now, so that someday we return there.

We have many shining examples of fasting in the Old and New Testament. Moses fasted forty days before receiving from God the Ten Commandments. The prophet Isaiah has written about fasting centuries before Christ's coming:

Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him... then shall your light break forth like the dawn ... (Isaiah 58)

In the Old Testament fasting is sometimes preparation for the Feast days, but more generally it is a sign of humility before God. Fasting accompanied mourning and repentance. In time of necessity of danger, it was appropriate for an individual or the whole community to fast. Fasting, so to speak, reinforced urgent prayer. How seriously it might be taken up, to the extent that an earnest man of prayer might become weak and think through lack of nourishment, is shown by Psalm 109:24:

My Knees are weak through fasting; and my flesh faileth of fatness.

Fasting in the New Testament was introduced by our Lord Jesus Christ Who gave us a great example of fasting. After His Baptism in the river of Jordan He withdrew into the wilderness where He spend forty days and forty nights in prayer and fasting in preparation for His sacred ministry. Jesus taught his disciples and followers to fast. He told them not to fast like the Pharisees, but when they fast bodily they should be completely natural in their behavior — humble and penitent.

And when ye fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by men, but by your Father Who is in secret. And your Father Who sees in secret will reward you. (Matt. 6:16-18)

Here we should mention that fasting in the Orthodox Church has two aspects: physical and spiritual. The first one implies abstinence from rich food, such as dairy products, eggs and all kinds of meat. Spiritual fasting consists in abstinence from evil thoughts, desires, and deeds. The main purpose of fasting is to gain mastery over oneself and to conquer the passions of the flesh. It is to liberate oneself from dependence on the things of this world in order to concentrate on the things of the Kingdom of God. It is to give

power to the soul so that it would not yield to temptation and sin. According to St. Seraphim, fasting is an "indispensable means" of gaining the fruit of the Holy Spirit in one's life, and Jesus Himself taught that some forms of evil cannot be conquered without it. When the Apostles failed to heal a sick and suffering child, Christ explained that, "This kind (meaning devil) can come out only by prayer and fasting." (Matt. 12:21) Commenting on this St. John Chrysostom said: "That these are like two wings that carry a person to the heights of God."

The Apostles of Christ continued in prayer and fasting, and commanded others to do the same. They fasted also as they accomplished their ministries by the power of the Holy Spirit and by prayer, as we reads in the Acts:

Now in the church at Antioch... while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts. 13:-13)

Today, I think it is safe to say, the practice and idea of fasting is largely ignored. Some people say that God's people need not fast since we are saved by grace and not by works, and that fasting can easily become hypocritical, done merely for show and for the condemnation of others. Many others generally dismiss fasting as something old-fashioned, simple and naïve. "This is the twentieth century; those rules were made for the past and simpler days."

Nonetheless, in spite of present practice of most people, we must take the practice of fasting seriously, if for no other reason, then out of respect for other people, throughout Christian history, who have taken it seriously. We all need to develop the habit of saying no to our carnal passions and desires. What we need is self-discipline and self-control. These are acquired only through regular spiritual exercise — namely through fasting.

Fasting is not at all an act of mortification for mortification's sake. It is not a "little suffering" which is somehow pleasing to God. It is not a punishment which is to be sorrowfully endured in payment for sins. On the contrary, fasting for a Christian, should be a joyful experience, because fasting is a self-discipline which we voluntarily impose upon ourselves in order to become better persons and better Christians. The sin of not fasting is the sin of failing to employ a practice which is absolutely necessary to a sinful person in his struggle to overcome his sins and to gain the love and communion of God.

Fasting is an art fully mastered by the Saints. These holy men and women, who have taken their religion and fasting seriously, can be of great help to us. They offer a number of recommendations for fasting.

1. Fasting is essential for us to regain control over our bodies.

We live in a pluralistic and secularistic society where the Biblical idea of fasting is completely ignored and forgotten. "Gluttony has become a way of life for a fallen man and, it affects every area of live, leaving us wide open to all types of temptation. We all eat too much, and fasting is the only way to end this unnatural obsession with food. Fasting puts food into its proper perspective. We must each in order to live, but we shouldn't simply live to eat." St. Isaac of Syria said: "The first commandment given to our nature in the beginning was the fasting from food and in this the head of our race (Adam) fell. Those who wish to attain the fear of God, therefore, should begin to build where the building was first fallen. They should begin with the commandment to fast."

2. Fasting simplifies our lives.

"By eating less, we can pay attention to more important matters, such as our relationship with God." Fasting is part of the spiritual life without which the soul perishes, suffocated by the flesh and choked by carnal pleasures. A human being must fast. The effort enlightens the mind, strengthens the spirit, controls the emotions and tames the passions. Thus "a man who strives for salvation... must not allow himself to eat to fullness ..." says St. Gregory of Sinai. St. Isaac of Syria says, "Meager food at the table of the pure cleanses the soul of those who partake from all passion ... for the work of fasting and vigil is the beginning of every effort against sin and lust ... almost all passionate drives decrease through fasting." An old man in the desert was asked why he was so severe on his body. He answered simply, "If I don't kill it, it kills me." By this the holy fathers taught us to be killers of passions and not killers of the body. Partake of everything that is permissible with thanksgiving, to the glory of God and avoid boastful arrogance; but refrain from every excess. (The Monks Callistus and Ignatius, 14c., Directions to Hesychasts.)

3. Fasting "lightens our load" and makes it easier to pray.

"For many people the refusal to fast is just one more excuse to cut themselves off from God. The person who wants to pray better should eat less. This makes the mind and the spirit less sluggish. We are then more capable of lifting our minds and hearts to God." St. Isaac of Syria says: "As long as man's mouth is sealed by fasting his mind will meditate on the repentance of his soul." Even the old Latins knew that "Plenus veter non studet libenter."

4. Fasting restores discipline to our lives.

"How many of us can honestly say that we are disciplined in spiritual matters as we should be? Fasting may just be the beginning of our journey toward spiritual seriousness, but we all have to start somewhere. We can all see what the lack of real discipline has done to American moral life. The same happens to our own spiritual lives without discipline. Fasting is the beginning of this discipline." That is why the Canons of the Church Councils — Trullo, Gangra and Laodicia as well as the rules and regulations of Sts. Dionisius, Peter and Timothy of Alexandria — order us to fast. According to Milas, "The Church has introduced fasting in the life of a Christian in order to enable man to live a life of piety and repentance. This regulation is based on the practice of the Church in the Old Testament and the examples of its Founder and the Apostles in the New Testament. The fast days which we must observe are ordered by the Church authorities and, therefore, are obligatory for all, except the sick; if a clergyman disobeys this rule he shall be deposed, and a layman excommunicated."

5. Another aspect of fasting is abstinence

"Not many parents enjoy the disobedience of their children. God is equally unhappy to see our disobedience in spiritual matters. Fasting encourages obedience to God's moral commands by making us center our lives around His." In other words, our fasting should not be self-willed but obedient. When we fast, says Kallistos Ware, "we should not try to invent special rules for ourselves, but we should follow as faithfully as possible the accepted pattern set before us by Holy Tradition." We should always rely on the spiritual advice of our priest or Father Confessor, as it was practiced in the early centuries of Church life, as Abba Antony said: "I know of monks who fell after much labor and lapsed into madness, because they trusted in their own work and neglected the commandment that says: 'Ask your father, and he will tell you.'" (Deut. 32:7).

6. Fasting ultimately brings about purity of heart.

"The saints teach that for us to purify our hearts we must begin with the control of our bodily desires through fasting. As long as the flesh rules purity of heart will not exist." In the words of St. John Chrysostom fasting implies not only abstinence from food, but from sins also. "The fast," he insists, "should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body: the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice." It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: "You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother." The same point is made in the Triodion, especially during the first week of Lent:

As we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion... Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil, to control the tongue, to forbear from anger, to abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God. Let us keep the Fast not only by refraining from food, but by becoming strangers to all the bodily passions.

7. Fasting returns us to a "Paradise-like" way of life.

Our forefathers Adam and Eve ate only plants rather than meat or meat products. (Gen. 1:30, 9:3) "When we fast, we voluntarily return to Paradise. We do this not because it is sinful to eat meat, but because we recognize our true homeland, the Kingdom of God, and we want to reinforce this truth in our lives." Our fasting and self-discipline, then, "signifies a rejection of the world, only in so far as it is corrupted by the fall; of the body, only in so far as it is dominated by sinful passions. Lust excludes love; so long as we lust after other persons or other things, we cannot truly love them. By delivering us from lust, the fast renders us capable of genuine love. No longer ruled by the selfish desire to grasp and to exploit, we begin to see the world with the eyes of Adam in Paradise. Our self-denial is the path that leads to our self-affirmation; it is our means of entry into the cosmic liturgy whereby all things visible and invisible ascribe glory to their Creator."

8. Finally, fasting is the foundation of and preparation for every spiritual effort.

"Spiritual effort presumes that we are in control of our bodies. Beyond this, fasting is the ideal preparation for spiritual celebration, such as Easter, Christmas, and other Feasts, because when undertaken properly, fasting fills our hearts and minds with the task before us. It concentrates our spiritual energies and makes them more effective." Thus, when Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:28) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (Kings 19:8-12), the fast was in both cases linked with a Theophany. The same connection between fasting and the vision of God is evident in the case of St. Peter (Acts 10:9-17) He went up to the housetop to pray about the sixth hour, and he became very hungry and wanted to eat; and it was in this state that he fell into a trance and heard the divine voice. Such is always the purpose of ascetic fasting — to enable us, as the Triodion puts it, to "draw near to the mountain of prayer."

Prayer and fasting should in their turn be accompanied by almsgiving, by love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness. As written in the Triodion:

Knowing the commandments of the Lord,
let this be our way of life:
Let us feed the hungry, let us give the thirsty drink,
Let us clothe the naked, let us welcome strangers,
Let us visit those in prison and the sick.

Then the Judge of all earth will say even to us:
Come, ye blessed of My Father,
inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.

Notes and References:

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Rev. Stavrofor Milan Savich fell asleep in the Lord in the year 2010 at age 90. The article is reprinted with permission of the Diocese of New Gracanica and Midwestern America of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

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