

THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING AND ITS OBSERVANCE TODAY

1. Fasting is a divine commandment (Gen 2:16-17). According to Basil the Great, fasting is as old as humanity itself; it was prescribed in paradise (*On Fasting*, 1, 3. PG 31, 168A). It is a great spiritual endeavor and the foremost expression of the Orthodox ascetic ideal. The Orthodox Church, in strict conformity with the apostolic precepts, the synodal canons, and the patristic tradition as a whole, has always proclaimed the great significance of fasting for our spiritual life and salvation. The annual liturgical cycle reflects the entire patristic teaching on fasting, the teaching on constant and unceasing watchfulness of the human person, and our participation in spiritual struggles. Accordingly, the Triodion praises fasting as grace that is full of light, as an invincible weapon, the beginning of spiritual struggles, the perfect path of virtues, the nourishment for the soul, the source of all wisdom, life imperishable, an imitation of the angelic life, the mother of all good things and virtues.

2. As an ancient institution, fasting was mentioned already in the Old Testament (Deut 9:18; Is 58:4-10; Joel 2:15; Jonah 3:5-7) and affirmed in the New Testament. The Lord Himself fasted for forty days before commencing His public ministry (Lk 4:1-2) and provided instructions on how to practice fasting (Mt 6:16-18). Fasting is generally prescribed in the New Testament as a means of abstinence, repentance, and spiritual edification (Mk 1:6; Acts 13:2; 14:23; Rom 14:21). Since the apostolic times, the Church has proclaimed the profound importance of fasting and established Wednesday and Friday as days of fasting (*Didache* 8, 1), as well as the fast before Pascha (Irenaeus of Lyons, as cited in Eusebius, *Church History* 5, 24. PG 20 497B-508AB). In ecclesiastical practice that has existed for centuries, there has always been diversity with regard not only to the length of the fast before Easter (Dionysius of Alexandria, *Letter to Basilides*, PG 10, 1277), but also the number and content of other periods of fasting which became customary under the influence of various factors, primarily, of the liturgical and monastic traditions, with a view to proper preparation for the great feasts. Thus, the indissoluble link between fasting and worship indicates the extent and purpose of fasting and reveals its spiritual nature. For this reason, all the faithful are invited to respond accordingly, each to the best of his or her strength and ability, while not allowing such liberty to diminish this holy institution: “*See that no one make thee to err from this path of doctrine... If thou art able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, thou wilt be perfect; but if thou art not able, what thou art able, that do. But concerning meat, bear that which thou art able to do*”(Didache 6, 1-3).

3. As a spiritual endeavor, the true fast is inseparable from unceasing prayer and genuine repentance. Repentance without fasting is fruitless (Basil the Great, *On Fasting* 1, 3. PG 31, 168A), as fasting without merciful deeds is dead, especially nowadays when the unequal and unjust distribution of goods deprives entire nations of their daily bread. “*While fasting physically, brethren, let us also fast spiritually. Let us loose every knot of iniquity; let us tear up every unrighteous bond; let us distribute bread to the hungry, and welcome into our homes those who have no roof over their heads...*” (Sticheron at Vespers on Wednesday of the First Week of Lent; cf. Is 58:6-7). Fasting cannot be reduced to simple and formal abstinence from certain foods. “*So let us not be selfish as*

we begin the abstinence from foods that is the noble fast. Let us fast in an acceptable manner, one that is pleasing to God. A true fast is one that is set against evil, it is self-control of the tongue. It is the checking of anger, separation from things like lusts, evil-speaking, lies, and false oaths. Self-denial from these things is a true fast, so fasting from these negative things is good” (Basil the Great, *On Fasting*, 2, 7. PG 31, 196D). Abstinence from certain foods during the fast and temperance, not only with regard to what to eat but also how much to eat, constitutes a visible aspect of this spiritual endeavor. *“In the literal sense, fasting is abstinence from food, but food makes us neither more nor less righteous. However, in the spiritual sense, it is clear that, as life comes from food for each of us and the lack of food is a symbol of death, so it is necessary that we fast from worldly things, in order that we might die to the world and after this, having partaken of the divine nourishment, live in God”* (Clement of Alexandria, *From the Prophetic Eclogae*. PG 9, 704D-705A). Therefore, the true fast affects the entire life in Christ of the faithful and is crowned by their participation in divine worship, particularly in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

4. The forty-day fast of the Lord exemplifies fasting for the faithful, initiating their participation in the obedience in the Lord, that through it *“we might recover by its observance that which we have lost by not observing it”* (Gregory the Theologian, *Homily 45, On Holy Pascha*, 28. PG 36, 661C). The Christocentric understanding of the spiritual dimension of fasting – in particular the fast of Great Lent – is a general rule in the entire patristic tradition and is characteristically epitomized by St Gregory Palamas: *“When you fast like this you not only suffer with Christ and are dead with Him, but you are also risen with Him and reign with Him forever and ever. If through such a fast you have been planted together in the likeness of His death, you shall also share in His resurrection and inherit life in Him”* (Homily 13, *On the Fifth Sunday of Lent*, PG 151, 161AB).
5. According to the Orthodox Tradition, the *“measure of spiritual perfection is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”* (Eph 4:13), and all who want to attain this should strive and grow accordingly. For this very reason, *ascesis* and spiritual struggle, like the refinement of the perfect, are endless in this life. Everyone is called to strive, to the best of his or her abilities, to reach the lofty Orthodox standard, which is the goal of deification by grace. Indeed, while they should do all things that they were commanded, they should nonetheless never vaunt themselves, but confess that *“they are unprofitable servants and have only done that which was their duty to do”* (Lk 17:10). According to the Orthodox understanding of the spiritual life, all people are obligated to maintain the good struggle of the fast; however, in a spirit of self-reproach and humble recognition of their condition, they must rely upon God’s mercy for their shortcomings, inasmuch as the Orthodox spiritual life is unattainable without the spiritual struggle of the fast.
6. Like a nurturing mother, the Orthodox Church has defined what is beneficial for people’s salvation and established the holy periods of fasting as God-given protection in the believers’ new life in Christ against every snare of the enemy. Following the example of the Holy Fathers, the Church preserves today, as she did in the past, the holy apostolic precepts, synodal canons, and sacred traditions, always advancing the holy fasts as the perfect ascetic path for the faithful leading to spiritual perfection and salvation, while proclaiming the necessity to observe all the fasts throughout the year, namely, the fasts of Great Lent, Wednesdays and Fridays, testified in

the sacred canons, as well as the fasts of the Nativity, the Holy Apostles, and the Dormition of the Theotokos; there are also the single-day fasts on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, on the eve of the Epiphany, and on the day commemorating the Beheading of John the Baptist, in addition to the fasts established for pastoral reasons or observed at the desire of the faithful.

7. The Church, however, has also established, with pastoral discernment, boundaries of philanthropic dispensation (*oikonomia*) concerning the rules of fasting. In this regard, the Church has considered physical infirmity, extreme necessity, and difficult times where she has ordained the application of the principle of ecclesiastical *oikonomia*, through the responsible discernment and pastoral care of the body of bishops in the local Churches.
8. It is a fact that many faithful today do not observe all the prescriptions of fasting, whether due to faint-heartedness or their living conditions, whatever these may be. However, all these instances where the sacred prescriptions of fasting are loosened, either in general or in particular instances, should be treated by the Church with pastoral care, “for God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezek 33:11), without, however, ignoring the value of the fast. Therefore, with regard to those who find it difficult to observe the prevailing guidelines for fasting, whether for personal reasons (illness, military service, conditions of work, etc.) or general reasons (particular existing conditions in certain regions with regard to climate, as well as socioeconomic circumstances, i.e., inability to find lenten foods), it is left to the discretion of the local Orthodox Churches to determine how to exercise philanthropic *oikonomia* and empathy, relieving in these special cases the “burden” of the holy fast. All this should take place within the aforementioned context and with the objective of not diminishing the importance of the sacred institution of fasting. The Church should extend her philanthropic dispensation with prudence, undoubtedly to a greater extent when it comes to those fasts, on which the ecclesiastical tradition and practice have not always been uniform. “It is good to fast, but may the one who fasts not blame the one who does not fast. In such matters you must neither legislate, nor use force, nor compel the flock entrusted to you; instead, you must use persuasion, gentleness and a word seasoned with salt” (John of Damascus, *On the Holy Fasts, Homily 3*, PG 95, 68 B).
9. Fasting for three or more days prior to Holy Communion is left to the discretion of the piety of the faithful, according to the words of Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite: “... fasting before partaking of Communion is not decreed by the divine Canons. Nevertheless, those who are able to fast even a whole week before it, are doing the right thing” (*Commentary of the 13th canon of Sixth Ecumenical Council*, Pedalion – English translation 307). However, the totality of the Church’s faithful must observe the holy fasts and the abstinence from food from midnight for frequent participation in Holy Communion, which is the most profound expression of the essence of the Church. The faithful should become accustomed to fasting as an expression of repentance, as the fulfillment of a spiritual pledge, to achieve a particular spiritual end in times of temptation, in conjunction with supplications to God, for adults approaching the sacrament of baptism, prior to ordination, in cases where penance is imposed, as well as during pilgrimages and other similar instances.