

# A Culture Obsessed With Food

*By Douglas Cramer*

I enjoy good food. And our Orthodox Christian faith is a sacramental faith, a faith which teaches us that the earthly joys of this world—including good food—are gifts from God. And certainly, our ancestors—whatever one's heritage—have known deprivation and have prayed that their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren would know peace and prosperity, and not go hungry.

But brothers and sisters, we all know that as a people, as a culture, as Americans, our relationship with food has become disordered. “Supersize” has entered our vocabulary. Public health officials warn about our growing obesity epidemic: 80% of Americans over 25 are overweight, and obesity-related illnesses like type II diabetes are out of control.

Our disordered relationship with food can be seen just as clearly at the other end of the spectrum. The diet and weight loss industry – from Jenny Craig to “Oprah’s Acai Berry Diet” – is booming. Desperately underweight models and actresses stare out at us from the grocery store magazine racks. We are a culture that is obsessed with food. And this obsession is literally killing us. Yet, we don’t want to take responsibility for our problem. As a people, we’re like the two young women who a couple of years ago sued McDonald’s because eating there all the time made them fat.

But, the Church teaches us that there is a better way—a healthier way, a saner way. We can learn to bring our relationship with food in to balance. And in the process, we can bring healing to our relationship to not just food, but to other parts of our earthly lives—how we spend our money, how we spend our time, how we care for our loved ones. The fasting days and seasons of the Church are there to teach us how.

We might look at the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, highlighted during the pre-Lenten season. In this parable we see two extremes: one unbalanced and ultimately leading to death, and the other one sensible, healthy, and ultimately leading to the path of life. In this parable, Jesus tells of two men who went to the temple to pray, a Pharisee – one of the spiritual leaders of Israel – and a Publican – a tax collector. What does the Pharisee pray? He prays, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.” The Pharisee is full of pride. He is so certain of himself. It never occurs to him that he might need help. That he might need healing. He is like the overweight diabetic who cannot see that he has a health problem, and heads out every morning for the donut shop. Or the eighty-pound teenager who just knows she needs to lose another five pounds. The way of pride is the way of death.

When we are overly certain of ourselves to the point of delusion, we can even make gestures towards health that do not really help. It is good that the Pharisee gives tithes. It is good that he fasts. But while the Scriptures do not tell us, I think the Pharisee was probably the kind of man who fasted twice a week, but was a glutton the other five.

In contrast, Jesus tells us about the Publican. What does the Publican pray? He prays, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” It is a simple prayer, a shorter prayer, and, as Jesus teaches, a humble prayer. The way of humility is the way of life. When we are humble, we can acknowledge our faults. We can come before God, and ask for help, and for healing. We can see how far short of our potential we have fallen. And, keeping our eyes on God, we can lift ourselves up and begin to make the changes we need to make. If the way of the Pharisee is the way of a glutton oblivious to his own declining health, the way of the Publican is the way of an athlete. It is no surprise that this is the language that the Fathers of the Church

often use when they talk about the Great Fast of Lent. They use the language of spiritual athleticism. “Strip yourselves,” wrote St. John Chrysostom, “for it is the season of wrestling.” With fasting days built in to our Church calendar throughout the year, we can apply this exhortation not only to the Lenten season, but to our daily lifestyle.

We must choose to be spiritual athletes, to recognize our failings and our need for healing – not so that we will despair, but so that we will start getting in shape. There are three practical things that we can do to change our relationship with food.

First, we can draw up a realistic plan and stick with it. All of us will struggle and will falter, but when we falter, we should plan to get back on track as soon as possible. This is true perseverance.

Second, we can change our relationship to food by changing the place that it holds in our lives. The disorder in our eating is not just about what we eat, but how we eat. We need to slow down. How many of us eat on the run? In our cars? In front of the television? In front of the computer? How often do we eat, and then realize that we did not even taste what we were eating? How can we be truly grateful for our food when we eat like this? A priest told me the story of how when his son was young, they used to go to lunch together. One day, his son told him, “Dad, I think that every time we eat together, it’s a blow against the devil.” Don’t eat like you are putting gas in your car. Eat more simply, slowly, and make it an occasion to converse and enjoy the company of others. Turn off the TV, and make a meal with your family. Thank God, sit with each other, and share in the joy of the companionship and the taste of the food. Then, go beyond even this. Find someone in the parish who does not have family to eat with, and invite them over for a meal.

Third, we should remember every day that our fasting discipline is about much more than food. It is about God. As mentioned, our faith is a sacramental faith. The earthly bounty of this world is not evil – it is a gift from God that we should partake of in gratitude. The problem is that we do not remember that God must come first. We forget that our first need, our first hunger, is for God. We use things – including food – to try to fill a God-shaped hole in our lives. So we should make our fasting discipline an opportunity to turn towards God. We should not go about with the sense that we are denying ourselves something. Instead, we should feel that we are giving something – giving ourselves God.

The whole purpose of fasting, of spiritual athleticism, is to bring ourselves back to God. To bring our attention back where it belongs. Stop obsessing about food: fast, and draw closer to God. Stop obsessing about money: give alms, and draw closer to God. Stop obsessing about time: go to church for worship, and draw closer to God.

Jesus said:

*“I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. ... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”*