

FASTING AND GREAT LENT

THE TRIODION

Great Lent is the 40-day season of spiritual preparation that comes before the most important Feast of the Christian year, Holy Pascha (which means “Passover” and is commonly called “Easter”). It is the central part of a larger time of preparation called the Triodion season.

The Triodion begins ten weeks before Easter and is divided into three main parts: three Pre-Lenten weeks of preparing our hearts, the six weeks of Lent, and Holy Week. The main theme of the Triodion is repentance—mankind's return to God, our loving Father.

This annual season of repentance is a spiritual journey with our Savior. Our goal is to meet the risen Lord Jesus, Who reunites us with God the Father. The Father is always waiting to greet us with outstretched hands. We must ask ourselves the question, “Are we willing to turn to Him?”

During Great Lent, the Church teaches us how to receive Him by using the two great means of repentance—prayer and fasting.

THE LENTEN FAST

The word “fast” means not eating all or certain foods. As Orthodox Faithful, we can fast completely at certain times of great importance, and especially each time before receiving Holy Communion. Usually, fasting means limiting the number of meals and/or the type of food eaten.

The purpose of fasting is to remind us of the Scriptural teaching, “Man does not live by bread alone.” The needs of the body are nothing compared to the needs of the soul. Above all else, we need God, Who provides everything for both the body and the soul. Fasting teaches us to depend on God more fully.

The first sin of our parents, Adam and Eve, was eating from the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:1-19). We fast from food, or a food item, as a reminder that we are to fast from sinning and doing evil.

There are several benefits of fasting. Fasting helps us pray more easily. Our spirit is lighter when we are not weighed down by too much food or food that is too rich. Through fasting, we also learn to feel compassion for the poor and hungry and to save our own resources so that we can help those in need.

Fasting is more than not eating food. Saint John Chrysostom teaches that it is more important to fast from sin. For example, besides controlling what goes into our mouths, we must control what comes out of our mouths as well. Are our words pleasing to God, or do we curse God or our brother?

The other members of the body also need to fast: our eyes from seeing evil, our ears from hearing evil, our limbs from participating in anything that is not of God. Most important of all, we need to control our thoughts, for thoughts are the source of our actions, whether good or evil.

Fasting is not an end in itself. Our goal is an inner change of heart. The Lenten Fast is called “ascetic.” This refers to actions of self-denial and spiritual training which are central to fasting.

Fasting is a spiritual exercise. It is not imposed or forced upon us. In the same way that true repentance cannot be forced upon anyone, each of us makes the choice to turn away from our sinful ways and go toward our loving, forgiving Father in Heaven.

THE PRELENTEN WEEKS

Before Great Lent begins, four Sunday lessons prepare us for the Fast. Humility is the theme of the first Sunday, called the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee. The Lord's parable in Luke 18:10-14 teaches that fasting with pride is rejected by God. For this reason, there is no fasting the week following this Sunday. This includes no fasting on Wednesday and Friday that week. (Wednesdays and Fridays are usually fast days throughout the year—Wednesday's Fast recalls the betrayal of Christ by Judas; Friday's Fast commemorates the Lord's Crucifixion.)

Repentance is the theme of the second Pre-Lenten Sunday, called the Sunday of the Prodigal Son. Before we can return to God, we need to recognize that we are far from God because of sin. Like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), we are in a self-imposed exile. Will we come to our senses as did the Prodigal Son and return to our Father?

The next Sunday is called both Meatfare Sunday and the Sunday of the Last Judgment. The second name refers to the Gospel lesson (Matthew 25:31-46) read on this day. The Lord tells us we will be judged at the end according to the love we have shown for our brother. "I was hungry..thirsty..naked...a stranger...in prison...sick... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine you did for Me." Almsgiving goes hand in hand with fasting. This Sunday is called Meatfare because it is the last day meat, fish or poultry is eaten before Easter, for those keeping the Lenten Fast.

The last Pre-Lenten Sunday is called both Cheesefare Sunday and the Sunday of Forgiveness. This is the last day dairy products are eaten before the Fast. The Gospel lesson (Matthew 6:14-21) read on this day tells us that our fast must not be hypocritical or "for show." Our work and our appearance are to continue as usual and our extra efforts are to be known only by God. The Gospel reading also reminds us that God the Father will forgive us in the same manner as we forgive our brother. With this promise of forgiveness, Great Lent begins on the next day, which is called Clean Monday. Clean Monday is a total fast day, except for a little water. No other beverages or food are taken.

GENERAL RULES OF THE LENTEN FAST

The Lenten Fast rules that we observe today were established within the monasteries of the Orthodox Church during the sixth through eleventh centuries. These rules are intended for all Orthodox Christians, not just monks and nuns.

The first week of Lent is especially strict. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, a total fast is kept. In practice, very few people are able to do this. Some find it necessary to eat a little each day after sunset. Many Faithful do fast completely on Monday and then eat only uncooked food (bread, fruit, nuts) on Tuesday evening. On Wednesday, the fast is kept until after the Presanctified Liturgy.

From the second through the sixth weeks of Lent, the general rules for fasting are practiced. Meat, animal products (cheese, milk, butter, eggs, lard), fish (meaning fish with backbones), olive oil and wine (all alcoholic drinks) are not consumed during the weekdays of Great Lent. Octopus and shell-fish are allowed, as is vegetable oil. On weekends, olive oil and wine are permitted.

According to what was done in the monasteries, one meal a day is eaten on weekdays and two meals on weekends of Great Lent. No restriction is placed on the amount of food during the meal, though moderation is always encouraged in all areas of one's life at all times.

Fish, oil and wine are allowed on the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25) and on Palm Sunday (one week before Easter). On other feast days, such as the First and Second Finding of the Head of Saint John

the Baptist (February 24) , the Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (March 9), the Forefeast of the Annunciation (March 24) and the Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel (March 26), wine and oil are permitted.

HOLY WEEK

The week before Easter, Holy Week, is a special time of fasting separate from Great Lent. Like the first week, a strict fast is kept. Some Orthodox Christians try to keep a total fast on Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday and Holy Wednesday. Most eat a simple Lenten meal at the end of each day before going to the evening Church services.

On Holy Thursday, wine is allowed in remembrance of the Last Supper. Holy Friday is kept as a strict fast day, as is Holy Saturday . Holy Saturday is the only Saturday in the entire year when oil is not permitted.

In short, these are the Lenten rules for fasting. Traditionally, the Church Fathers recommend that someone new to fasting begin by resolving to faithfully do as much as he or she is able during the Lenten period. Each year as one matures as a Christian, a fuller participation can be undertaken. However, it is not recommended that a person try to create their own rules for fasting, since this would not be obedient or wise. The Faithful are encouraged to consult with their priest or bishop regarding the Fast when possible.

Personal factors such as one's health and living situation need to be considered as well. For example, an isolated Orthodox Christian required to eat meals at their place of employment, school or in prison may not be able to avoid certain foods. The Church understands this and extends leniency.

It is important to keep in mind that fasting is not a law for us—rather, a voluntary way of remembering to not sin and do evil, and to help keep our focus on prayer, repentance and doing acts of kindness, for we “are not under the law but under grace” (Romans 6:14).

EASTER, BRIGHT WEEK AND THE PASCHAL SEASON

The Lenten Fast is broken following the midnight Easter service. With the proclamation, “Christ is risen!” the time of feasting begins. The week after Easter is called Bright Week and there is no fasting. For the next 40 days, the Church celebrates the Paschal (Easter) season. Joy and thanksgiving are the fulfillment of our Lenten journey.