

ON FASTING DURING GREAT LENT

Fasting, specifically as it affects the issue of what and how much we are to eat, is always a topic that receives much attention when we prepare to begin Great Lent. Fasting is an ancient tradition in the Church and not one that we should easily ignore or dismiss. **We all must fast during Great Lent. What then should we do?**

We should begin by reminding ourselves of the basics of the Church's traditional discipline of fasting. During Great Lent the strictest levels of fasting are prescribed, with certain exceptions allowed for weekends and feastsdays. The traditional norm, as developed and followed over many centuries in the Orthodox Church, is that we would abstain from the following items (listed here in order, beginning with those items which are eliminated first, on down to those items that many be permissible at some times):

- Meat and meat products (must be restricted)
- Milk and Egg Products (often referred to as "dairy." These items are perhaps permissible for some, for example, young children, the elderly or those in poor health.)
- Fish (permissible on certain feasts during Great Lent)
- Olive Oil (permissible on weekends and certain feasts in Lent)
- Wine (this means all alcoholic beverages; they are permissible on weekends and certain feasts during Great Lent)

So then, generally speaking, during Great Lent we are to make do with the following types of food:

- Shellfish and Crustaceans (shrimp, clams, etc.)
- Vegetables
- Vegetable Products
- Fruit, Grains (breads, pasta, rice, etc.), Nuts, etc.
- Non-alcoholic, dairy-free beverages

Having laid out the traditional guidelines for fasting, certain points must be made in reference to them. **First of all, each of us must make an honest, prayerful assessment of how well we can maintain the fasting discipline. If we are unable—due to age, illness, or some other weakness—to follow completely the traditional order of fasting, we must then make a decision about what we are going to do.** Over-scrupulosity in this regard will not save us, but neither will any rationalizing away of the need to fast. Each and every person, usually together with the other members of his or her family and, if necessary, in consultation with

his or her parish priest, needs to make an honest and prayerful decision about how he or she is going to keep the Fast.

For Church events—such as Sunday morning “Coffee Hours,” and “Bring and Share” meals following the Divine Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts—we need to keep strictly to the traditional disciplines of the Fast so that those who are following those norms will not be placed in any sort of awkward situation.

That being said, we must remember that the purpose of fasting (along with its "siblings" among virtuous acts—almsgiving, and prayer) is to make us better able to carry out the two great commandments of our Savior, that is, to love God and to love our neighbor. **If we fast from food, but do not increase in love for God and others, our fasting is without purpose.** The same is true for both charitable giving (almsgiving) and prayer. Love is the highest rule, above and beyond any other pious disciplines. Therefore, a consistent teaching of the saints is that, while we are to make every effort to keep the Fast, the law of love teaches us that we are not to make a spectacle of ourselves in our fasting and if we are presented with a situation where love requires us to break the fast, then we must do so, and make up for that break in discipline through our care for one another.

Fasting, of course, does not concern just changes in our diet. **When we fast we should be making a concerted effort to change our entire style of life.** Just as when we embark on a program of physical fitness we not only adjust our diet, but also other facets of our lifestyle including exercise and rest, so too when we fast we are called to make changes in our entire life. The point of Great Lent is to restore our life to its proper state through a process of repentance that involves and encompasses our whole person. Therefore, when (not if!) we fast, we must also redouble our efforts in prayer and charity. We must “re-program” ourselves, and consider carefully our use of time. We must consider not only what we are allowing to enter us as food, but also what is entering us through what we read, hear, and watch. We must make and keep a plan of renewal during Great Lent that encompasses our whole person and life. This plan should have as its aim not just to redeem the time of Lent, but also to help us make lasting changes in our lives for the sake of our salvation and the salvation of those around us—positive changes that will persist even after Great Lent is over.

A holy person of our time has pointed out that when we judge other people, we often lose the opportunity to love them. Let us all remember during Great Lent to open ourselves with honesty and humility to God’s judgement and leave the judging of others to Him: He is the only just judge and only He knows the true condition of a man or woman, His creature. **Let us receive the coming of Great Lent and Lenten fasting with joy, with “bright sadness,” grateful for this time of repentance and renewal made possible by God’s perfect love for us, His humble and unworthy servants.**

– *Fr. John Hopko*