

Is Fasting an Obligation?

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The newly spread tone among believers regarding the fast is that it is not obligatory or a duty. Consequently, the believer can ignore it or practice it whenever and however he wants.

Fasting is a necessary and binding virtue. If the commandments of the Lord in His Holy Gospel are binding, then fasting is necessary and binding. The Lord Himself asked us to fast: “This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29); “And when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites” (Matt. 6:16); “And after they had fasted and prayed, they laid their hands on them” (Acts 13:3). The clearest example for believers is Jesus' practice of fasting. He fasted for forty days. If He Who is without sin has fasted, how much more do we need to fast as humans, especially since we know that He was incarnate and lived in our midst to give us the ways of salvation which are needed for us, by imitating what He did?

The commitment of faithful Christians to the teachings and the direction of the Church comes from our devotion and our belonging to it, and consequently to achieving our Christian goal, in association with our brethren in the Church family. But choice based on personal mood and preference is a source of complacency, which prevents liberation from earthly bonds, because it is linked to the mood that is controlled by the passions, and thus the person becomes incapable of transcending with his life towards its main purpose. It is also a way to separate himself from the unity of the community.

Throughout history, the Church, which is the living Body of Christ, has experienced the importance of the fast. And she set its structure, system, form, and duration according to the experience of sanctification that accompanied her in the presence of the Holy Spirit who is working in her at all times.

This discussion leads us to the status of the fast and its position in the path of salvation for the person and the community. In the Orthodox understanding, fasting is not a goal in itself, as well as prayer and other virtues, but rather a necessary means to reach the main and great goal, which is our union with God and living closer to Him—what St. Seraphim of Sarov called "the acquisition of the Holy Spirit." St. Seraphim says in this regard: “The true aim of our Christian life consists

of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, vigils, prayer, almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ's sake, these are the only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God.”

Because fasting is a means to the ultimate goal, it can be flexible in terms of application. The Church requires the personal guidance of the spiritual father, in this regard, out of keenness, to protect the believer from complacency and indolence, the two vices that people fall into very easily, especially in our time.

When we invite our friends, we do not set a table for them as for the sick, but as for healthy people. We set up a table rich in various foods. Each of the guests chooses what suits his health. Thus, the fast, as established by the Church, is required of every believer. And whoever's health, circumstance, or situation does not allow him to fast as defined by the Church, he requests the guidance of the spiritual father for what benefits him personally. And he must commit to it, to that guidance given to him specifically, and not spread it as a general rule. He should do that until he reaches a situation in which he can follow the fast fully.

Asceticism in the Orthodox Church has one indispensable goal, which is liberation. Therefore, the fast is not abstaining from food to despise it or to torture the body or to mortify the sense of taste. It is a practical training, for the soul and the body, to be free from any bond that can keep us down. Perhaps the following words of Fr. Alexander Elchaninov (+1935) illustrate the practical benefit of the fast. He says, “Fasting disturbs and disrupts physiological leisure, so that a person becomes receptive to the spiritual world and absorbs from it more easily.”

Here are some aspects of the flexibility in living the fast in the Orthodox Church:

The general fasting rule says that fasting becomes stricter when the feast is more important. Therefore, the Paschal Fast is called Great Lent, where we abstain from food and drink until noon, in addition to abstaining from animal products throughout the fast. The Nativity Fast focuses on abstaining from certain types of food and not abstaining fully from any food for certain periods.

We abstain from fish during the Great Lent, while we do not abstain from it during the Nativity Fast, except in the last two weeks before the feast.

In Middle Eastern countries, where vegetables are available even in winter, we abstain from fish during Great Lent, while it is allowed to eat it in cold northern

countries such as Russia and Scandinavia. In our countries, it is allowed to eat shellfish (plus calamari and octopus) in coastal areas due to their availability and cheap cost in the past.

It is also allowed to eat fish on some great feasts such as the Annunciation and Palm Sunday, both of which fall within this holy season. Those who abstain from oil are allowed to consume it, as well as wine, on Saturdays and Sundays during Lent, as well as on the feasts of the great local saints (see *The Horologion*).

These provisions in the fasting systems indicate that it is a means of enjoying the happiness of liberation from every lust that prevails over man, on the one hand, and the joy of consuming earthly goods with thanksgiving and gratitude, on the other hand. And whoever reads the prayers of the services of Great Lent from the book of the Holy Triodion realizes how many words of joy, happiness and spiritual pleasure are repeated in it.

Let us, therefore, introduce fasting in this spirit, so that it becomes a real transcendence, and not just a diet.

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