Practical Answers about Fasting

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

During this fasting season, we are often asked, as spiritual shepherds, detailed questions about how to fast, differences in fasting practices from one region to another, and related matters. In this brief article, I will shed some light on the questions most frequently discussed within the Archdiocese.

- Let us begin with the Church's guiding principle: the faithful prepare for a feast by fasting. For this reason, fasting periods generally precede the major feasts. On a personal level, a believer may also prepare by fasting for significant circumstances in life: a serious illness, a great tragedy, a decisive turning point, and so forth. This is arranged with one's spiritual father.

- The same principle also holds that the greater the feast, the more rigorous and ascetical the fast becomes. Since Pascha, for example, is the greatest feast, the "Feast of feasts and Festival of festivals," we prepare for it with a fast that is both longer and more rigorous than the Nativity Fast. In Great Lent, fish is permitted only on the Annunciation and Palm Sunday, since both are feasts of the Lord and the Theotokos, directly concerning Christ and His Mother. During the Nativity Fast, however, fish and seafood are permitted during the first two weeks.

- In keeping with this principle, fish is not permitted during the final two weeks of the Nativity Fast. This is precisely because the feast is drawing near, preparation becomes more earnest, and ascetical restraint intensifies. For this reason, the celebration of the sacrament of marriage is also, as a rule, prohibited during this period.

- We abstain from certain foods during a fast because abstinence teaches us self-control, helps us rise above the appetites of the belly, and deepens our solidarity with the poor and hungry in a tangible way. These foods are not considered unclean. This helps us understand why believers living in Mediterranean countries abstain from fish, while those in cold countries such as Russia and Ukraine eat it, since fish and

seafood are abundant there and vegetables are almost unavailable during winter.

- Likewise, in coastal cities generally, the faithful have traditionally eaten seafood classified as mollusks, such as octopus and similar creatures, because it is readily available and inexpensive. Some attribute this practice to the absence of blood in these creatures, since blood of animals is not to be shed during a fast. In one of its meanings, fasting is a return to peace with creation. Permission to eat meat was given after Noah's flood, not at the beginning of human creation.

- As living conditions have changed, shellfish, for example, has become very expensive in some countries. Eating it, therefore, does not fit with the spirit and purpose of fasting. A believer may discern and abstain from it even though the fasting rule permits it. The same applies to any food that is costly or expensive in the region where we live.

- The prohibition against celebrating the sacrament of marriage during Great Lent and the final part of the Nativity Fast has both spiritual and practical pastoral reasons. During an ascetical fast, married couples abstain, as far as they are able, from marital relations, following the Apostle's words: "Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to prayer" (1 Corinthians 7:5). Weddings are also usually accompanied by festivities and banquets which do not accord with fasting. Moreover, most of the faithful do not consider a banquet worthy of the occasion unless it includes meat.

- When many Churches adopted the Western calendar for the fixed feasts, including the Nativity, we retained the forty-day fast. The period during which marriages were prohibited, however, continued to follow the Eastern calendar, from December 20 to January 7. Twenty-five years ago, the Holy Synod of Antioch adjusted this period to five days, from December 20 to 25. This change responded to increasing emigration and employment outside the traditional territory of the Patriarchate of "Antioch and All the East." It also took into account both the availability

of transportation and travel and the difficulty of obtaining leave from work at any time of the year.

- The faithful's reverence for the Theotokos, together with her place in the heart and doctrine of the Church, has made the fast preceding her feast on August 15 widely cherished and observed by the great majority of believers. Since the Theotokos is the model of virginity and chastity, the faithful have also traditionally refrained from holding weddings during this fast. Fasting practices vary, shaped both by devotion to the Theotokos and by the abundance of vegetables and fruit. Thus, some believers observe this fast without oil, cooked food, or the use of fire.
- During Great Lent, the most important fasting season, we observe two forms of fasting: abstaining from all food and drink from the night before until twelve noon the following day, and then eating fasting food, free of meat and animal products.
- In decades past, abstinence from food and drink continued until sunset. Exercising the authority to bind and loose given to her by Christ, the Church changed this to 12:00 noon because the conditions in which the faithful lived had changed. Society was no longer agricultural; occupations had multiplied and diversified, and working hours had grown longer. Cities had also expanded greatly, requiring people to spend considerable time commuting and traveling each day. These and other structural changes have taken place and continue to do so.
- The Lenten observance includes the preparatory week (Cheese-fare) before the fast, during which we abstain only from meat; the six weeks of Great Lent itself; and then Holy Week, when ascetical restraint becomes more rigorous than during the other days of the fast.
- Abstinence from olive oil has two aspects. First, it refers to every kind of oil. The liturgical books use the term "olive oil" because historically this was the oil available to the faithful; other vegetable oils were not known in earlier times. Today, therefore, the expression means all oils, not olive oil alone. For this reason, recently printed liturgical books use simply the

word “oil.” Second, abstinence from oil is practiced today in monasteries. Outside monasteries, most Orthodox Churches no longer regard it as obligatory. Many of the faithful therefore observe it voluntarily, under the guidance of their spiritual father.

- The Church has its fasting rules, but applying them to one’s personal circumstances requires the help of a spiritual guide when a believer needs to relax the fast, break it occasionally, or cannot observe it as prescribed because of a health condition. These particular personal circumstances are addressed with one’s spiritual guide: the parish priest or father confessor. The believer keeps this guidance private and does not turn it into a general prescription to announce or recommend to others. Personal spiritual guidance is necessary and essential in every aspect and circumstance of a believer’s life, not only in fasting.
- A believer who did not grow up in a household that observed the fasts begins fasting under the guidance of a spiritual father or parish priest, who gradually helps the person experience the fasts and enter their spirit and essence. This takes place through patient formation that considers the believer’s health, physical condition, work, and psychological well-being. We are on the path of salvation. Some run along it; others walk calmly and steadily. Still others, carried away by enthusiasm, exceed their strength, grow tired, and must sit down for a little while to rest and regain their energy.

Any understanding that associates fasting with deprivation and self-torment is not Orthodox. We fast so that we may rise above our passions, be purified, and be sanctified in spirit, soul, and body. God asks us to fast for our own sake, for our salvation, because fasting benefits us, strengthens us, and makes us steadfast. God wants us to grow, mature, and attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

Everyone who has experienced something of life with God knows the sweetness of fasting and the benefit it brings.