

Keeping the Fasts in the Byzantine Tradition

Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving and righteousness (Tobit 12:8)

A Reflection Given on February 8, 2016

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Tonight's talk is on "Keeping the Fasts in the Byzantine Church Tradition." This begs the question, "What is the Byzantine Tradition?" To summarize: The Apostles spread the Christian faith throughout the Roman Empire and the known world. In the early centuries four great centers of Christianity emerged in the cities of Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome and Alexandria. Then in 330 AD the Imperial Capital was moved from Rome to the city of "Byzantium" which was re-named "New Rome" (and later became known as "Constantinople" –the city of Constantine). The Church of Constantinople used the Liturgy of Antioch and began a process of adapting and enhancing it as its own. Because it was the capital of the empire, which had people from all over the world, Constantinople also became a great metropolis and center of Christianity. It became the most influential Church in the East developing a highly complex and beautiful liturgical tradition, a highly defined and precise theology and a profound synthesis of Christology (i.e., the teaching of who Jesus is). The Byzantine-Constantinopolitan tradition became so profound its influence was felt in all the surrounding Churches including the Roman & Armenian Churches (e.g., St. Gregory the Great brought our 8 tones to Rome which became the basis for their Gregorian Chant & our Litany of Peace became the Latin Church's *Kyrie Eleison*, etc.). The Byzantine Tradition was most fully adopted by the Greek, Syriac, Romanian and Slavic peoples and eventually brought to America, where now it is observed by Americans of various ethnicities.

Tonight's talk will consist of 3 parts: In the Byzantine Tradition, (A) when do we fast? (B) From what do we fast? (C) And why do we fast?

1. When do we fast?

The Byzantine Church has four primary fasting periods throughout the year which correspond roughly to the four seasons:

A. The Nativity Fast (Winter)

- A 40 day period preceding the Feast of our Lord's Nativity in the Flesh (aka Christmas).
- It is popularly known as "Phillip's Fast" – because it begins the day after the feast of St. Phillip the Apostle.
- It is meant to prepare us spiritually for the coming of our Lord into the world.

B. The Great Fast (Spring)

- A 40 day period preceding Holy Pascha (the feast of our Lord's Resurrection).
- The strictest and most significant fasting period of the year.
- It is called "the Great Fast" to distinguish it from the other fasts of the year.

- The word "Lent" comes from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning "spring." So originally it was probably "The Lenten or Spring Fast."
- Some try to make our tradition more intelligible to westerners by combining the two titles by calling the season "Great Lent" but "Great Fast" is the historic name of the period.
- We follow the example of our Lord who, after His baptism in the Jordan, went out into the wilderness and fasted for forty days. We too, after the celebration of His Baptism, imitate His example and enter a period fasting for forty days.
- It is followed by an additional week of intense fasting known as Great & Holy Week.
- The Great Fast is the Fast of Fast, preceding the Feast of Feasts, Holy Pascha.

C. The Apostles' Fast (Summer)

- Begins on the 2nd Monday after Pentecost and concludes on the Feast of Sts. Peter & Paul on June 29.
- There is evidence for it in the West as far back as the 5th century, but only the East keeps it to this day.
- This fast acknowledges & celebrates how, following Pentecost the Apostles went out from Jerusalem into all the world to spread the Holy Gospel.
- Tradition says the Apostles began their mission to the world with a fast to ask God to strengthen them for their mission.
- The Fast was instituted out of thanksgiving to God for the witness of the Apostles of Christ and to ask God to help us imitate their example in spreading the Gospel.

D. The Dormition Fast (Fall)

- Begins on Aug 1st and lasts 2 weeks (till Aug 14) before the Feast of the Dormition (or Falling Asleep) of the Theotokos.
- Traditionally this is the 2nd strictest fast of the year (next to the Great Fast).
- Meant to spiritually prepare us for the great feast of the Theotokos' death and translation into heaven.
- Just as the Theotokos fulfilled God's plan for her life and was victorious over sin and death: We too, if we fulfill the work God has laid out before us, will be victorious over death and be granted eternal life.

E. Ordinary Fast Days

- Every Wednesday and Friday throughout the year is a day of fast in the Byzantine Tradition.
- This is a most ancient Christian tradition of East and West.
- It is testified to in the oldest Christian document outside of the New Testament, known as the "*Didache*" or "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" (c. 70 AD).
- It states: Don't be like the Jews who fast on Mondays and Thursdays. Instead, fast on Wednesdays and Friday.
- The Fathers of the 6th Ecumenical Council stated: "Wednesday is to be a fast day, because on it the Jews conspired to betray Jesus; Friday [is to be a fast day] because He then suffered for us." (Constantinople III, 680 AD).

2. From what do we fast?

My goal today is not to tell you how you should fast. Instead my goal is share with you with some basic principles from Byzantine Tradition to help us understand how to DEVELOP our practice of fasting in accord with our tradition. First the East has a very different approach than the West. Whereas the West states the minimum rule for everyone the approach of the East is actually the opposite. The East states the maximum and encourages the faithful to do their best to try to keep it. Most people today have a very difficult time imagining themselves going 40-50 days without meat, fish, dairy or oil. But we have to remember the principal: "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." Although we may not be able to keep the strictest or fullest form of the fast, surely we can keep some of it. Therefore with each new penitential period of the Church we have plenty of opportunity to develop our practice of fasting.

To start, we must remember our Holy Fathers teach us that abstinence and fasting from food are INDESPENSIBLE as tools of repentance. St. Basil the Great once said, "Since we were wounded by sin, we must treat it with penance. But penance without fasting is worthless. Therefore justify yourself before God by fasting." So for Eastern Christians, fasting from food remains an essential part of repentance. To make sense of our observance of Meatfare and Cheesefare Sundays we have to recognize that our Byzantine Tradition calls us in some way to regulate our consumption of food derived from animals (including meat, fish and dairy). In the East fasting is more about the regulation or intake of food from animals rather than just the giving up of meat. The more important the penitential day or period, the more we try to avoid these. These ascetical acts can be further described as either abstinence or fasting. Abstinence" refers to the avoiding of certain kinds of foods for a period of time (like not eating meat, dairy or fish on certain days). "Fasting" is the avoidance of all food for a duration of time (like not eating or drinking anything until noon). Both of these ascetical acts are helpful and important.

But we must also note that all things must be done in moderation. The best way to develop our practice of fasting is with the assistance of a spiritual Father or Mother. This can be a priest, deacon, monk or nun who is familiar with our Byzantine Tradition. They can help us remember many other important principles. For example, according to our Byzantine Tradition, Apostolic Canon 66 states we never fast on Sundays because it is the Lord's Day. It is also important emphasis in Eastern tradition that the fast is meant to be a corporate one in which all the faithful work together as one Body. We assist one another through our prayers, fasting and almsgiving. We can even work together to help each other to keep the fast as is evidenced in the many Lenten recipe books that exist filled with recipes for dishes without meat or dairy.

It is equally important to note that it has never been the practice of the East to legalistically judge those who fall short of full fast. St. Paul admonishes us, "The man who will eat anything must not ridicule him who abstains from certain foods; the man who abstains must not sit in judgment on him who eats... Who are you to pass judgment on another's servant?" (cf. Rom 11). Indeed, in the Paschal Homily of St. John Chrysostom (+ 407), read every year on Pascha, St. John speaks directly to those who are unable to keep the traditional fast in the most embracing and encouraging of words.

Lastly the Byzantine Tradition on fasting is not limited to diet. We are called to avoid WHATEVER is contrary to the penitential spirit of the season. As St. John Chrysostom once warned, "It is possible for one who fasts NOT to be rewarded for his fasting. How? When indeed we abstain from foods, but do not abstain from iniquities; when we do not eat meat, but gnaw to pieces the homes of the poor; when we do not become drunkards with wine, but we become drunkards with evil pleasures; when we abstain all the day, but all the night we spend in

unchaste shows. Then what is the benefit of abstention from foods, when on the one hand you deprive your body of a selected food, but on the other you offer yourself unlawful food?"

3. Why do we fast?

A. Where does fasting come from?

Our first parents were told by God to abstain from certain foods (viz. "The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil"). The Holy Fathers see the eating of that fruit as symbolic of man's taking into himself that which is unhealthy, poisonous and even deadly -something God wanted man to avoid. So the eating of food and the abstaining from food have always had a connection spiritually with the avoidance of evil. This is seen in the Old Testament.

B. Old Testament Background:

It was a Jewish practice to fast on Mondays and Thursdays. As the Jewish Rich Man who came to our Lord stated, "I fast twice a week" (Lk 18:12). In addition to these ordinary fast days, public fasting periods were regularly observed and special times of fasting were sometimes proclaimed (like on the Day of Atonement or in times of mourning, 2 Chr. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; Neh. 1:4-11, Lev.16:31-34, Zech 7:5; 8:19). The story of the Prophet St. Jonah is a powerful example of the people turning to God in repentance and corporate penance and receiving God's mercy as a result (cf. Jonah 3:6-10).

C. New Testament Practice:

The Church followed this Biblical pattern and also encourages the faithful to lead lives of repentance. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directs us to practice almsgiving (St. Mt. 6:1-4), fasting (6:16-18) and prayer (7:7-11) as means of repentance. Yet He also admonished that in making such sacrifices we must not neglect "the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith." As He rebuked the Pharisees, "...these you ought to have done without neglecting the others." (St. Mt 23:23).

One of the foundations of Orthodox Christian belief is that we are all sinners in need of repentance and God's mercy. As St. Paul states: All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Therefore, because we all sin, God points us to repentance. We've been talking a lot about mercy this year. The ONLY way we can receive God's mercy is by repentance. Otherwise mercy is meaningless if we are not sorry for our sins. And in order to be sorry we have to understand what sins are. So we have to have teaching... the Church must teach the faith, it must teach what God's will is and what God's will is not. Then we can repent and receive God's mercy. This is what the penitential periods in the Church are meant for.

When Jesus was asked in the Gospel, "Why is it your disciples do not fast like John the Forerunner's disciples?" His answer was, "Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? ...The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away... and then they will fast..." (Mark 2:19-20). So now the Church does fast. When the Apostles could not cast out an evil spirit, our Lord explained to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but

prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29). Fasting is never an end in itself. As our Church Fathers admonish us, God is not impressed by the fact we don't eat. Even the devil does not eat.

Fasting is supposed to be an opportunity for humility and repentance rather than an occasion of pride. As our Lord tells us in the Gospel on the Sunday before the Great Fast, “When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting... and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Mt 6:17-18). Fasting without prayer is nothing but (at best) dieting and (at worst) self-inflicted punishment. Fasting must be joined to prayer. As our Lord tells us, certain spirits can only be driven out through prayer and fasting. Thus we fast and pray to drive out the spirits of pride, envy, anger, laziness, covetousness, gluttony and lust.

St. Athanasius the Great elaborates on the Eastern understanding of fasting, stating, “Do you see what fasting does? It heals illnesses, drives out demons, removes wicked thoughts, and makes the heart pure. If someone has been seized by an impure spirit, let him know that this kind, according to the word of the Lord, 'can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting'” (Matthew 17:21). Fr. Ayman Kfouf explains, “Through fasting, we control our senses and our physical weakness from all that hinders our contemplation of God. As we seek to become empty and not overfilled, we become freer to commune with Him in prayer.” St. Isaac the Syrian states: “Fasting, vigil and prayer are God’s holy pathway and the foundation of every virtue.”

In keeping the Great Fast, it is our Lord’s own example we imitate: “Jesus fasted to show us how to overcome temptation. His hunger of His flesh did not control Him; rather, He controlled His flesh.” (OSB note, St. Mt 9:14-17). Therefore the Church, in obedience to our Lord’s teaching and example, sets apart numerous days and periods throughout the year for the faithful to reflect on our relationship with God. Where this relationship is lacking we have numerous opportunities for repentance, penance and confession of our sins. Without repentance and forgiveness, there is no way to receive God’s boundless mercy.