THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
Department for External Church Relations

The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today

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1. Fast is God's commandment (Gen 2:16-17). According to St Basil the Great, fasting is *as old as humanity itself; it was prescribed in Paradise* (On Fasting, 1,3). It is a great spiritual endeavour and the foremost expression of the Orthodox ascetic ideal. The Orthodox Church, in strict conformity with the precepts of the holy apostles, the rules of the Councils and the patristic tradition as a whole, has always proclaimed a great significance of fasting for people's spiritual life and salvation. The annual cycle of liturgical celebrations fully reflects the patristic teaching on fasting, as well as the teaching on the necessity of constant unrelaxing watchfulness and on how to succeed in spiritual endeavours. The Triodion praises fasting as *bringing the light of grace*, as *the invincible arms*, *the beginning of spiritual warfare*, *the perfect path of virtues*, *the nourishment for the soul*, *the source of wisdom*, *the life imperishable and imitation the angelic life*, *the mother of all blessings and virtues*, and as *the image of the life to come*.
2. As an ancient institution, fasting was mentioned already in the Old Testament (Deut 9:18; Is 58:4-10; Joel 2:15; Jonah 3:5-7) and affirmed in the New Testament. The Lord Himself fasted for forty days before entering upon His public ministry (Lk 4:1-2) and gave to people instructions on how to practice fasting (Mt 6:16-18). Fasting as a means of abstinence, repentance and spiritual growth is presented in the New Testament (Mk 1:6; Acts 13:3; 14:23; Rom 14:21). Since the apostolic times, the Church has being proclaiming a profound importance of fasting, having established Wednesday and Friday as fast days (Didache, 8,1) and the fast before Easter (St Irenaeus of Lyons in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5, 24). In church practice that has existed for centuries there has always been a variety with regard not only to the length of fast before Easter (St Dionysius of Alexandria, Letter to Basilides, PG 10, 1278), but also to a number and content of other periods of fasting which became customary under the influence of various factors, primarily, of the liturgical and monastic traditions, with the view of proper preparation of people for great feasts. Accordingly, the indissoluble link between the fast and the liturgy indicates an extent and a purpose of fasting and emphasizes the spiritual nature of the fast, with all the faithful called to observe it, each to the best of his or her abilities and in respect to this sacred precept: *See that no one make thee to err from this path of doctrine… If thou art able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, thou wilt be perfect; but if thou art not able, what thou art able, that do. But concerning meat, bear that which thou art able to do* (Didache, 6, 1-3).
3. As a spiritual endeavour, the true fast is inseparable from unceasing prayer and genuine repentance. *Repentance without fasting is fruitless* (St Basil the Great, On Fasting, 1,3); fasting is also fruitless without deeds of mercy, especially nowadays when the unequal and unjust distribution of benefits deprives entire nations of their daily bread. *While fasting physically, brethren, let us also fast spiritually. Let us loose every knot of iniquity; let us tear up every unrighteous bond; let us distribute bread to the hungry, and welcome into our homes those who have no roof over their heads…* (Stichera at Vespers on Wednesday of the First Week of Lent; cf. Is 58:6-7). Fasting shall not be reduced to simple and formal abstinence from certain

foods. *So let us not be selfish as we begin the abstinence from foods that is the noble fast. Let us fast in an acceptable manner, one that is pleasing to God.* (cf. Phil 4:18). *A true fast is one that is set against evil, it is self-control of the tongue. It is the checking of anger, separation from things like lusts, evil-speaking, lies, and false oaths. Self-denial from these things is a true fast, so fasting from these negative things is good (*St Basil the Great. On Fasting, 7).

Abstinence from certain foods during the fast and temperance in choosing what and how much to eat constitute a visible aspect of this spiritual endeavour. *In the literal sense, fasting is abstinence from food, but food makes us neither more nor less righteous. However, in the spiritual sense, it is clear that, as life comes from food for each of us and the lack of food is a symbol of death, so it is necessary that we fast from worldly things, in order that we might die to the world and after this, having partaken of the divine nourishment, live to God* (St Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae*. PG 9, 704-705). Therefore, the true fast refers to the life, in all its fullness, of believers in Christ and is crowned by their participation in the liturgy, particularly in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

4. The forty-day fast of the Lord sets an example for the faithful in fasting, making them participants in the obedience of the Lord, *in order that we might recover by keeping it that which we had lost by not keeping it* (St Gregory the Theologian, The Second Oration on Easter, 28). St Gregory Palamas summarizes the Christocentric understanding of the spiritual dimension of fasting, of Lent in particular, characteristic of the whole patristic tradition, *When you fast like this you not only suffer with Christ and are dead with Him, but you are risen with Him and reign with Him forever and ever. If through such a fast you have been planted together in the likeness of His death, you shall also share in His resurrection and inherit life in Him* (St Gregory Palamas, Homily 13, on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. PG 151, 161).
5. According to the Orthodox Tradition, the measure of spiritual perfection is the measure of *the stature of the fulness of Christ* (Eph 4:13), and all who want to attain it should strive and grow. For this very reason, the ascesis and spiritual endeavour, like the perfection of the perfect, are endless in this life. Everyone is called to strive to the best of his or her abilities to meet the requirements of the lofty Orthodox criteria and attain deification by grace. And those who attain it, albeit they do all the things that they were commanded, never vaunt themselves, but confess that they *are unprofitable servants* and *have done that which was* their *duty to do* (Lk 17:10). According to the Orthodox understanding of spiritual life, all people ought to persist in fighting their good fight of fasting, and even while permitting some indulgences, to rely upon God's mercy in remorse and awareness of their unworthiness, for the Orthodox spiritual life is unattainable without the endeavour of fasting.
6. Like an affectionate mother, the Orthodox Church has defined what is necessary for people's salvation and established the sacred periods of fasting as God-given protection of the new life of believers in Christ from every snare of the enemy. Following the example of the Holy Fathers, she preserves now, as she did in the past, the holy apostolic precepts, the conciliar rules and the sacred traditions, always offering fasts to the faithful as the best ascetic path leading to spiritual perfection and salvation, and proclaiming the necessity to observe all the fasts prescribed in the year of the Lord, that is, Lent, Wednesday and Friday, which are established in the sacred canons, as well as the Nativity, the Apostles' and the Dormition fasts, one-day fasts on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, on the eve of the Theophany and on the commemoration day of the Beheading of St John the Baptist, as well as the fasts established for pastoral reasons or observed at the wish of the faithful.
7. At the same time, the Church, for pastoral reasons, has set limits of her loving *oikonomia*

concerning the rules of fasting. Therefore, it is to the cases of physical infirmity, extreme necessity or difficult times that she has ordained to apply the principle of ecclesiastical *oikonomia*, in accordance with the discernment and pastoral care of the episcopate of the Local Churches.

8. The fact is that many faithful today do not observe all the prescriptions concerning fasting, either for faint-heartedness or because of their living conditions, whatever is meant by this. However, all cases of non-observance of the sacred prescriptions concerning fasting, either general or individual, should be treated by the Church with pastoral care, for God has *no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live* (Ezek 33:11). At the same time, the importance of fasting should not be diminished. Therefore, it is left to the Local Orthodox Churches to define an extent of her loving *oikonomia* and indulgence towards those who have some difficulties in observing the existing rules of fasting, be it for their personal reasons (illness, military service, conditions of work, etc.) or for more general reasons (climatic conditions, social and economic situation in some countries, for instance, lack of fasting foods), and to ease in these special cases the “burden” of fasting, as stated above, by no means diminishing the importance of the sacred institution of fasting.

The Church should show the compassionate indulgence with all prudence and, undoubtedly, to a greater extent when it comes to those fasts, with regard to which the ecclesiastical tradition and practice have not always been uniform. *It is good to fast, but may the one who fasts not blame the one who does not fast. In such matters you must neither legislate, nor use force, nor compel the flock entrusted to you; instead, you must use persuasion, gentleness and the word seasoned with salt* (St John of Damascus, On the Holy Fasts, 7).

9. Moreover, all the faithful children of the Church ought to observe the holy fasts and abstain from food since midnight to prepare properly for partaking of the Holy Communion which is the most profound expression of the essence of the Church. They also ought to fast to show repentance, to fulfil spiritual vows, to succeed in achieving particular spiritual goals, at a time of temptations, when they apply to God in supplication, before baptism (for adults) or ordination, when penances are imposed, and also during pilgrimages and in other similar cases.

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