

On Lenten Fasting

Great Lent will begin on Monday, March 7. Since yesterday was Meatfare Sunday, some fasting has already begun for those who observe that designation. (This is meant to "ease" us into the fuller fasting discipline following Cheesefare Sunday). I get my fair share of questions each year about the precise nature of the prescribed fasting for Great Lent. I also assume that there is a certain amount of confusion over this, because we pick things up from other church traditions that do not quite fit into our own Orthodox Tradition. Preparing for next Monday, I wanted to pass on the fasting guidelines of the Church. I found a very clear article about this entitled, "Our Fasting During Great Lent," by Fr. John Hopko. It is attached to a book published by SVS Press: *When You Fast - Recipes for Lenten Seasons*. Fr. John's article is to the point, and it also has some sound pastoral considerations added, so I will simply pass on the relevant paragraph or two for your reading and reference:

"We should begin by reminding ourselves of the basics of the Church's traditional discipline of fasting. During Great Lent, the strictest level of fastings are prescribed, with certain exceptions allowed for weekends and feast days. 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 that are eliminated first and then on down to those items that may 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)
- fish (permissible on certain feasts during Great Lent)
- olive oil (permissible on weekends and certain feasts during Great Lent)
- wine (this means all alcoholic beverages; they are permissible on weekends, and certain feast days during Great Lent)

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

- shellfish (shrimp, clams, etc.)
- vegetables
- vegetable products
- fruit, grains (bread, pasta, rice, etc.) nuts, etc.

- nonalcoholic, 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 the traditional order of fasting completely, we must then make a decision about what we are going to do. Being overly scrupulous 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." (pp. 247-248)

A clear and pastorally-balance approach in my estimation. Please give this your prayerful consideration, as Fr. John writes. (The book from which this article is taken, by the way, is filled with hundred of lenten recipes, from "main dishes" to "cookies and desserts(!)" Again, it is available from SVS Press, and a direct link is featured on our special section, Great Lent ~ Resources for the Journey..

As to the fasting, there is no doubt that it is both a disciplined and a healthier way of eating and drinking. We are always hearing of the latest "program" to guide our nation's eating habits in a healthier direction, especially in our school systems. Obesity among our children is far too high. We know that the first foods to be eliminated for health reasons are always red meat and sugar-laden sweets - cakes, doughnuts, ice cream, etc. These concerned educators, social planners, and dieticians need look no further than the Orthodox Church's century-old practice of fasting - linked to the virtues of discipline, obedience and asceticism!

As Fr. John noted, it is sound advice to speak with your parish priest about these issues and how they may be integrated into family life. Please contact me if you so desire.

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