

Some Thoughts on Fasting, by an Orthodox Priest

***Editor's Note:** As a pastor's wife, I am often asked questions about the "rules" of Orthodox fasting. As we approach the celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord, I thought it would be wise to reflect on the meaning of the fast, both as preparation for the coming feast, and as a tool for overcoming the passions. One Orthodox pastor agreed to share with our readers some of his insights. However, taking his own advice to fast "in secret" and not "allow our left hand to know what our right hand is doing," he has asked to remain anonymous. May his advice, the fruit of many years as a pastor, help you avoid the pitfalls of becoming overly preoccupied with what you do (or do not) eat during the time of the fast, and also with spending so much time in preparing the food you'll eat to break the fast that you lose sight of the very purpose of the feast you are celebrating.*

Fasting is not optional for Christians. Neither are prayer and almsgiving. Our Lord did not say "if you fast," but rather "when you fast." He Himself fasted. Those to whom He personally directed His words and teachings maintained a tradition of fasting. Perfecting that tradition by coupling it with prayer and almsgiving, our Lord revealed that the very heart of our lives as Christians is rooted in these ascetic traditions.

However, our Lord was also clear in chastising those who observed the fast, who prayed, and who gave alms for the purpose of being observed and applauded by others or as a means to fulfill the law. Indeed, the Pharisees received their reward: "My," they delighted in hearing, "aren't they spiritual, aren't they righteous, aren't they generous, and aren't they worthy of emulation?" But their actions were to no avail, and brought with them no heavenly blessing. Hence, we are taught to fast "in secret," to pray "in secret," to give alms "in secret," not allowing our left hand to know what our right hand is doing, so that our heavenly Father will reward us openly.

Fasting as Preparation for True Celebration

Our Lord fasted for forty days before beginning His public ministry. This indicates that one aspect of fasting is preparation. The Church's fasting seasons prepare us to celebrate, to feast, and to focus our attention on that which we anticipate celebrating, rather than on the mundane things that all too often compete for, or dominate, our attention.

While food is an essential element of any celebration—as we are reminded on Pascha, as our festal food is blessed, or as we bless fruit on the Great Feast of Transfiguration—it can also be a preoccupation, something that can dominate our time and attention to the detriment of more important aspects of our earthly existence. Sadly, before major celebrations we tend to spend inordinate amounts of time planning menus, testing new recipes, and the like, all with the hope that our celebration will be memorable, enjoyable, and tasty. In the process, the very thing we gather to celebrate is often obscured, misplaced, and lost.

This is especially so in the days—or, to be more specific, the months—leading to the celebration of Christmas, during which we are tempted to focus our preparations on foods, decorations, gifts, and the like, rather than on the glorious mystery of the Incarnation, which is at the very heart of our faith as Christians. The Nativity Fast (like all the fasting seasons) is meant to remind us to prepare ourselves spiritually, to bring under control those things, including food, that are well within our control, but that we have allowed to control us, and to apply the self-control that fasting teaches us to other areas of our lives.

Fasting from Passions, not from "Prohibited Foods"

During the first week of Great Lent we are reminded that, while fasting from food, we must fast from our passions—anger, gossip, jealousy—while intensifying our vigilance, our prayer lives, and our ministry to others, especially the least among us. Hence, fasting as a

preparation is quite the opposite of the worldly preparations that all too often focus our celebration on ourselves, rather than on our Lord and the joyous mysteries He so lovingly shares with us and engages us in celebrating.

Of course, fasting from food is at the very heart of the ascetic life. Food can be a passion, a preoccupation that can easily dominate our lives. We fret over what to eat and what not to eat. We agonize over trans fats, cholesterol, carbs, and calories. We drink Ensure to gain weight, and then sign up at a weight loss clinic to lose it. In fact, we have an entire TV network devoted to food! All too often, we have ceased "eating to live" and instead "live to eat."

If fasting is ever to become a real solution to this preoccupation with food, we need to recognize that fasting does not mean merely avoiding certain "prohibited" foods while partaking of others that are "approved." Years ago, I was given a Lenten cookbook that, in the preface, offered an extremely detailed explanation of the Church's fasting tradition. As was to be expected, it noted that one should refrain from eating meat and meat products, dairy products, fish, wine, and oil. And also, as was to be expected, it noted that eating shellfish—lobster tail, crab legs, scallops, prawns and shrimp, clams, and the like—does not violate the fast. But, curiously, this preface offered a warning, in bold underlined letters, that when eating shellfish, one should not use drawn butter, but melted margarine, since butter is a dairy product! How ridiculous, I thought. Emptying ourselves of our passion for food involves reducing not only how much and what we eat, but also how much time we spend thinking about food, preparing food, reading about food, discussing food, and manipulating food to fit the fasting tradition of the Church.

The same cookbook offered a recipe for a Lenten chocolate cake, at the end of which was written, "Your family will enjoy this delicious cake so much that you'll want to serve it all year 'round!" Consider this: One could devise a Lenten weekly menu that, while fully avoiding meat and meat products, dairy products, fish, wine, and oil, would be anything but ascetic—lobster tail on Monday, grilled prawns on Tuesday, Alaskan king crab legs on Wednesday, lemon-drenched shrimp on Thursday, and scallops on Friday, all with melted margarine so as to avoid butter, of course! Legally, this indeed fulfills the fasting laws, but it completely misses the spirit of fasting, as does the yummy Lenten chocolate cake or the tofu Italian "sausage" or "chicken wings" guaranteed to "taste like the real thing."

It's only my opinion, but approaching fasting in this manner—"this is permitted, but that isn't"—not only misses the mark of fasting, but can become a spiritually dangerous temptation, the same temptation to which the Pharisees succumbed by adhering meticulously to the externals of the law while remaining clueless as to its internal spirit. This approach can easily lead to spiritual pride and delusion and the self-satisfaction that comes in assuring oneself that "while I'm delighting in this tasty cake, I'm relieved to know that it meets all Lenten requirements since there's not a drop of half-and-half in it." This, it seems to me, is neither fasting, nor ascetical, nor a desire to free oneself from a preoccupation with food. In fact, it reflects the opposite, as more time is spent figuring out how to make tofu taste like sausage than it would take to simply and mindlessly fry a link of real sausage.

Putting the Time Saved and Money Saved to Work

Taking things one step further, this legalistic approach to fasting is utterly detached from prayer and almsgiving. The time saved by not worrying about what we'll eat or how we'll prepare it, much less adapting recipes to fit Lenten rules, could be more wisely spent in prayer, in worship, in meditation and the reading of Scripture or the Holy Fathers. To the degree we rely on very simple and basic foods and spend little time in food preparation during the fast, we'll have time to reflect on the countless other things (our anger, our jealousy, our self-centeredness, our sloth, our despair, our lust for power, our idle talk) that are surely within our control, but that we so often have allowed to control us.

And, to take all of this one step further, might not the money saved by purchasing simple food be stewarded more wisely by giving it to those who have less, or nothing? By quietly and anonymously giving it to an agency that assists those who are out of work or homeless or abused? Might we not devote a portion of our time to volunteering at one of those agencies, feeding those in need with the loving and personal human contact that reveals God's presence in this world?

Preparation for the Heavenly Banquet

Fasting is not optional. Neither are repentance, prayer, almsgiving, preparation, asceticism, ministering to the least among us, wisely managing our time and talents and treasures, struggling to overcome our passions, and so on. They're all related, interconnected, essential. So fast we must—to the extent that we can—without comparing ourselves to others. Still less should we engage in endless and spiritually dangerous public discussions on what we've given up this Lent or how weary we've become by fasting from those things (including but hardly limited to food) that we've allowed to control us even though we have the ability, with God's help, to control them.

Fast we must, in the Holy Spirit rather than in the spirit of the Pharisees, and in secret, without fanfare or discussion. And fast we must, delighting not in our ability to transform chocolate cake into a Lenten delight, but in allowing our Lord to transform us as we delight in tasting and seeing how good He, the "Bread which came down from heaven," truly is. Such fasting not only prepares us for the celebration of His Incarnation or Resurrection, but prepares us for the eternal heavenly banquet, to which He invites us, in His Kingdom.

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