



FASTING

Is It Really Necessary?

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Over the years, many people have asked me what the Church's fasting requirements are during Great Lent. Some questioned the value of this ancient practice, and others looked at it with intimidation as they found themselves unable to keep the fast in its strictest forms. As you can imagine, I have spent countless hours trying to explain the tradition of fasting and convince others of its value, dissuade them from looking at it in a legalistic manner and guide them to a proper view of the fast so that it may bear spiritual fruits in them.

The result: I have learned a lot myself, and I hope that at the least, I have been able to help those who approach the fast sincerely looking for a true transformation of themselves through this spiritual exercise.

Here are a few things I would like to share with you from what I have learned:

THE PRACTICE OF FASTING IS INDEED A MOST ANCIENT ONE

Fasting was very prevalent in ancient times and required by the Hebrew people on many occasions as an exercise of discipline and for purification from sin. But the most profound example of fasting in the Old Testament is found with Moses. When he ascended Mount Sinai to encounter God, “he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water” (Exodus 34:28). He ascended the mountain purifying his body, soul and mind. There, Moses was in the presence of God and spoke with Him. When he returned to the Jewish people bearing the plaques of the Ten Commandments inscribed by the finger of God, he was filled with the glory of

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the Lord. His face shone like the sun and the people could not even look at him (Exodus 34:29–35). This came about because Moses had reached the ultimate state of purification (*katharsis*), which allowed him to attain the state of illumination and finally become a dwelling place of the uncreated light of God (we call this transformation and unity with God *theosis*). Fasting was an essential element for Moses’s purification as he approached God and stood in His presence. Ultimately, he was filled with the divine light.

The New Testament period begins with a man who lived on locusts and wild honey—St. John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4; Mark 1:6). He lived in the desert and practiced a strict life of *askesis* (spiritual training) of which fasting was a major part. St. John is the one who received the revelation that the Messiah had come, that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus. Fasting was essential as he lived out a holy life filled with God’s wisdom and strength.

Finally, the practice of fasting was sanctioned by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself when He fasted for forty days in the desert before embarking on His earthly ministry. He began His fight against the devil (Matthew 4:1–2) with a strict form of fasting accompanied by prayer. Fasting was part of His *askesis* in His battle with temptation. When the devil offered Jesus bread to quench His hunger, Jesus pointed out that man cannot live by bread alone (Matthew 4:4) but needs to obey and honor God as well in order to attain eternal life.

THE PRIMARY GOAL OF FASTING IS TO HELP US KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD SO THAT WE MAY BE ABLE TO ENTER HIS KINGDOM

It is a form of *askesis* that helps us acquire spiritual discipline. Fasting enables us to detach ourselves from earthly pleasures, even those as essential as food. It helps us discipline the desires of the flesh and take control over our passions. The first couple, Adam and Eve, fell away from God because they decided to eat the forbidden fruit. We fast even from things that are good for us in an effort to reverse the results of the fall. By controlling what goes into our mouth and stomach we train ourselves to control what comes out of our mouth and heart. Through the discipline of fasting we may also control our eyes and avoid looking at things that will aggravate our passions further. Fasting also helps us learn to control our anger and, above all, manage our ego and pride, which are the main causes of our sinfulness.

According to St. John Chrysostom, fasting is to the soul what food is to the body; in the same way that material food nourishes the body, fasting strengthens the soul and makes its wings lighter and able to move more easily. Fasting helps lift the soul above this world to communicate uninhibited with the Creator, free from attachment to the pleasures and lusts of this life.

IN THE TRADITION OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH, FASTING IS NOT AN END IN ITSELF

Rather, it offers spiritual medicine to cure our spiritual ills. It provides renewal, sanctification and fortification when applied in conjunction with several other practices that help us heal, find peace and experience God's love. Repentance through the confession of sins is one of those practices needed along with fasting. Confession is the place and time where we humble ourselves and surrender to God's mercy. Through this act of humility we open up the heavens for the light of God to shine into our hearts and heal us. Forgiveness of others is also necessary, as we ask for God's forgiveness for our personal sins and try to find peace in our hearts. Prayer, both individual and communal, is essential to connect to the Lord spiritually and allow Him to unite Himself to us, heal us and grant us His joy. Almsgiving and mercy toward those who are suffering is also necessary in this spiritual journey to perfection. Finally, the study of the Holy Scriptures and other spiritual books is of great benefit to the person struggling in spiritual warfare. God's wisdom and guidance comes to us through the holy books and stories of the lives of the saints. Fasting by itself will not suffice in our journey to theosis.

In these ways, we prepare ourselves to ascend the mountain with Moses, to approach the Lord with a pure heart so that His light may dwell in us and enlighten, sanctify and deify us. Holy Communion is, for us, the top of Mount Sinai where we finally become one with Him and offer Him our whole being in order to heal, transform and perfect us.

The Church provides these tested ways for the healing of our souls in the same way a hospital provides the best tested treatments for the healing of our bodies. No one goes to the hospital and gives advice to the doctors about how they may treat his or her particular disease. We respect the opinion of the doctors because they have knowledge through training; they have treated others before us and acquired the experience to treat specific ailments. In the same way, we need to trust the Church and the wisdom given to her by God. We need to trust experienced spiritual fathers and allow them, through the Sacrament of Confession and spiritual guidance, to prescribe the medicine specific to our need. That is the only way to recover from any spiritual ailment and be restored to peace and joy in Christ.

It is therefore necessary to take all these steps in our journey to the Kingdom of God and the state of perfection. In order to ascend the mountain with Moses, place ourselves in the presence of God and attain theosis, we must begin with fasting.

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