

When we Fast...

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Fasting has always been very difficult for me. I am not what one would call a great faster and I struggle every year with the fast periods of the Church. I love food! Anyone who knows me knows that I have never missed a meal and I love to eat. I guess my size would be a great give away on this issue. However the Orthodox Church, of which I am priest, believes in the spiritual discipline of fasting during certain periods of the church year.

Presently we are in one of those periods. This time of year, August 1st through the 14th is known as the Dormition Fast. There is some evidence that during this time period the fast was split in two parts, The Fast for Transfiguration and the Dormition Fast. We have grouped them together for some unknown reason but perhaps that can be the topic of another essay. For now we will keep out comments focused on fasting in general.

Why do we fast? What is the purpose of the fast? We fast because the church tells us to fast. Right? Wrong! Fasting from food is intended as spiritual preparation for an experience of deeper communion with God. When we fast, and pray, we become more sensitive to God's personal presence, in essence we become closer with the Creator God. We must fast from a sense of willingness not from a place of obligation or because someone tells us too. Fasting is difficult and must be undertaken in the right spiritual mindset.

First let us clear up something that has bothered me since my conversion to Orthodoxy. Fasting is the total absence of food, in other words nothing gets eaten! What we as Orthodox do should be called abstinence. We abstain from certain foods during certain times of the year. I will not address the fast for communion in this essay that is another topic that has nothing to do with the weekday fast or the Great Fast. The other thing I will say is do not come to confession and tell the priest you ate a hamburger on Friday, I could care less and God could care less as well. The question you need to ask yourself is why did you eat that hamburger on Friday and get to the root of the problem. Please do not confess the so called food sins, save that for Oprah and Jenny Craig.

We often have a hard time preparing meals during this time of year as well. I often have parishioners ask what can I make during this time, I only know how to cook with meat. Well there are a ton of things that can be made, and all that one need do is look around and recipes can be found. The internet is an amazing source of all things fast related to check it out and see what you can find. The other thing to think about is fasting is also simplicity in eating. Americans are gluttons. We want everything super sized and we eat until we have to loosen our belts or we just cannot put another fork full in our mouths. Please know I put myself in this same category. I love the large fries from McDonalds notice I said LARGE fries. So maybe a way to start with all of this is portion control. Rather than put all those bowls on the table with all that food, make the plates up for your family and put them on the table and go from there. As Americans we also waste an amazing amount of food.

Growing up we had these things in the fridge called must goes also know as left overs. How often do we put something in the fridge only to throw it out latter on? Let us fast from throwing food away and perhaps cooking only what we intend to consume. Okay I am getting way off the point here.

Fasting from foods is a spiritual discipline that must necessarily be accompanied by fating from evil. I have said this many times before. The idea behind fasting is a change. A change in the person we are into something different. The entire Lenten journey is designed to make us different in the end then we were in the beginning. St. Basil tells us that fasting is not only abstaining from certain foods it is first of all abstaining from EVIL. Wait a minute, you mean this is supposed to do something in me? Yes it is!

Church father have written thousands of words on fasting but the bottom line is if we can control what we put in our mouth then we can control all of the other passions. If we can control not only what we eat but the amount of what we eat, and can harness that passion then the others will call fall into place. However if we fast and do not pray then it is all for not.

Fasting without prayer is folly and the Christian should never fall into that sin. In the Lenten Triodion fasting is described as the mother of chastity & prudence, the accuser of sin & as the advocate of repentance. So we see that fasting needs to include not only lack of food but prayer and also confession.

Confession is a very misused and misunderstood sacrament of the church. Confession is good for souls someone once said. Confession is a time when we can take stock of all that we have done, or not done, and get a big do over with God. What better time to come to confession then during the fast periods of the church year. It is perfect for us to come to confession.

So who should fast? All Christians should fast to the level that can fast. Now that is a very confusing statement let's try and unpack this a little. If you have never been a great faster then to try and jump in with both feet will lead to almost certain failure. Nothing pleases the Evil One more than when a Christian fails at a Spiritual Discipline. That's why we need to pray while we fast. We are also never supposed to undertake anything new without the guidance of our Spiritual Father. This is another misused and misunderstood practice in the Orthodox Church.

Our Spiritual father's are our guide in the spiritual life. If we ask our spiritual father for guidance and it is given then he will be praying for us as well as we should be praying for him. If we are struggling with the fast talk to your Spiritual Father and seek his guidance. But like I said we all should try and fast at some point. The basic fast is every Wednesday and every Friday. We should try and keep this fast as best as we can, however this fast has nothing to do with communion and if you slip during the week DO NOT stay away from communion.

I said I was not going to address the communion fast in this essay but I see I am going to have too. The communion fast in its strictest sense is nothing by mouth before communion and no meat or dairy after Vespers on Saturday night. Okay nothing by mouth, what is that all about? Nothing, absolutely nothing should pass your lips before communion. This is kind of easy because most of the time we are sleeping anyway. The challenge is the morning coffee! As in all things do the best you can. Now let me say this. If you are on medication and need to take it with food or water TAKE THE MEDICATION! This does not violate the fast one bit in fact the greater sin is making yourself sick by not doing what you are supposed to do. Okay enough on that.

I also feel that during the fast we should do more than just give up certain foods. Perhaps we cannot do this for whatever reason. Maybe we are not in control of what is prepared for us. If we travel we are exempt from the fast unless it is possible. Let me say this, if you are traveling and eating out, there are many things that one can order that do not violate the fast and what better Evangelical tool do we have then to say order a salad whilst everyone else is ordering a steak. Let them as you why and then evangelize them.

During the fast we also abstain from harming our neighbor, envying our fellow man and from being prejudice. Man if we could do that the world would be a better place. To me abstaining from those things is much more important than not eating a hamburger and if you do not abstain from those things then that is something that should be brought to confession.

The other part of this is not what we do not do but what we do. Alms giving is a long standing practice in the church and one that has not been practiced well in that last few years. If you limit the amount of food or skip a meal during the fast period consider giving the equivalent of that meal to the poor. Collect non perishable food and give it to the local food pantry. Volunteer at a shelter to cook meals or something else. Visit the sick, those in prison or just try to be a nice person. Maybe, just maybe we could all fast from complaining about fasting or complaining in general. Nothing breaks the community down faster than people who complain. Fast from that and see how your community changes.

The danger in all of this is what St. John Chrysostom calls hypocritical fasting. Doing one thing but acting in another way.

"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 unchastened 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 offer yourself unlawful food?"

This is the challenge of the fast is to be different when it is over than we were when it began. We need to pray and confess during this period of the church year and not just look at it as just another season of the Church. In her wisdom the church has set this time up just for that reason. Don't worry so much about what you eat but what you do. Actions speak louder than words. No one needs to know what you do or do not do during the fast. Speak with your Spiritual Father about all of this and do not try and do it alone. Fasting should also include the reading of Scripture not just on Sunday but every day.

I will end with a quote from the Gospel of St. Matthew on fasting. There are hundreds of references to fasting in the Scriptures but this one has always stood out as the best one:

*“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they will have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly”
(Matthew 6:16-18).*