

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a few short days, we will enter into the period of the Great Fast. For some people, the idea of fasting seems to have lost much of its traditional spiritual meaning and origins. For many who recognize the value of fasting but do not see it within a spiritual context, fasting is seen as having a primarily physical or therapeutic value, i.e. it is seen as having value primarily for the care of one's body. While fasting does, indeed, provide benefits to physical well-being, it is, for Christians, first of all a "therapy" to heal those aspects of our lives all that prevents us from conforming to the will of God. The Great Lenten fast can provide an opportune time to re-discover the spiritual roots of this practice and to reconfirm our personal commitment to the traditional fasting practices of the Orthodox Church. Doing so will assist us in our Lenten journey to Pascha by helping us to set aside our self-centeredness, open our heart to greater love of God and neighbor, the first and greatest Commandment of the new Law and compendium of the entire Gospel (Matthew 22:34-40), and help us live our lives in keeping with God's Will.

Many might wonder what value and meaning there is for us to deprive ourselves of foods that are good and useful for our bodily sustenance. The Holy Scriptures and the entire Christian tradition teach that fasting is a great help to avoid sin and all that leads to it. For this reason, the history of salvation is filled with occasions that emphasize the value of fasting. In the very first pages of Sacred Scripture, the Lord commands man to abstain from partaking of the prohibited fruit: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (*Gn* 2, 16-17). Commenting on this divine command, Saint Basil the Great comments that "fasting was ordained in Paradise," and "the first commandment in this sense was delivered to Adam." He thus concludes: "'You shall not eat' is a law of fasting and abstinence." Since all of us are weighed down by sin and its consequences, fasting is proposed to us as an instrument to restore friendship with God. Such was the case with Ezra, who, in preparation for the journey from exile back to the Promised Land, calls upon the assembled people to fast so that "we might humble ourselves before our God" (Ezra 8:21). The Almighty heard their prayer and assured them of His favor and protection. In the same way, the people of Nineveh, responding to Jonah's call to repentance, proclaimed a fast, as a sign of their sincerity, saying: "Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?" In this instance, too, God saw their works and spared them.

In the Gospels, Jesus shows us the profound motive for fasting. He condemns the attitude of the Pharisees, who scrupulously observed the prescriptions of the law, but whose hearts were far from God. True fasting, as the Lord states elsewhere, is rather to do the will of the Heavenly Father, who "sees in secret, and will reward you" (Matthew 6:18). He Himself sets the example, answering Satan, at the end of the forty days spent in the desert that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). The true fast is thus directed to eating the "true food," which is to do the Father's will (John 4:34). If, therefore, Adam disobeyed the Lord's command by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the Christian believer, through fasting, strives to submit himself humbly to the will of God, trusting in His goodness and mercy.

The practice of fasting is very present in the earliest days of the Christian community (Acts 13:3; 14:22; 27:21; 2 Corinthians 6:5). The Fathers, too, speak of the force of fasting to overcome sin, especially the lusts of the "old Adam," and open in the heart of the believer a path to God.

Moreover, fasting is a practice that is encountered frequently and recommended by the saints of every age. Saint Peter Chrysologus writes: “Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others, you open God’s ear to yourself.”

It is important for us to remember that the ultimate goal of fasting is to help each one of us make the complete gift of ourselves to God. May all of us use well this time of Great Lent in order to cast aside all that distracts us from those things which nourish the soul and move it to greater love of God and neighbor. Let us enter the penitential spirit of Lent, asking the Most Holy Theotokos to accompany and support us in our spiritual journey to Pascha.

With love in the Lord,

Father David