

Christian Fasting – means of spiritual improvement

The Church takes care not only of the souls of men, but also of their bodies. Fasts are held before Great Feasts or in days reminding us of the passions and deaths of Christ.

Fasting = abstinence from certain types of food, to repress the instincts and evil lusts of the body, to strengthen the soul in the struggle with temptations. A bloated body leads us to vices.

Fasting has also medical value: it allows the stomach to rest, protects health. That is why young people in Sparta were subjected to strict fast. Examples of people that fasted: St. Paul of Thebes (lived to 113 years on bread and water); St. Anthony the Great; St. Paphnutius; St. Macarius the Great of Egypt.

The fast - enlightens and raises the soul; is a worthless exercise if it is not accompanied by prayer, confession, Holy Communion, charity and progress in good deeds.

The fast is also to honor God, because it is a willing renunciation of something allowed. It is a resemblance to angels who do not need nourishment, but also to God, Who does not need food.

We also fast because by eating from the forbidden fruit we became mortal. According to Tradition, Adam ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil on a Friday. This is why we fast on Friday, but especially because the Lord was crucified on Friday.

Fast also means refraining from evil actions and thoughts, controlling ones tongue, repressing anger, avoiding temptations, gossip, and lies.

Types of fast:

- **based on strictness:** absolute fast (total), strict fast (dry food - bread, fruits, vegetables), common fast (cooked fasting foods), lenient fast (fish, wine, oil allowed).

- **based on the number of believers who fast at the same time:** general fast (the entire Church), local fast (held in a certain region, due to some calamity), private fast (held by a believer who promised God that he would fast for some reason).

- **based on length:**

1. One day fasts:

a. **Wednesday** - Jesus Christ was betrayed by Judas Iscariot on this day; **Friday** - the day of the Crucifixion, and the day when Adam ate the forbidden fruit. For pagans, Wednesday was dedicated to Mercury, the merchant god, and Friday to goddess Venus (Venera), who was celebrated with scandalous parties. That is why no weddings or parties take place on Wednesdays and Fridays.

b. **Exaltation of the Holy Cross** – September 14th - because it reminds us of the Lord's passions.

c. **Beheading of Saint John the Baptist** – August 29th - because St John kept the strictest fast, because he preached repentance, and for his martyrdom.

d. **Theophany Eve** – January 5th – total fast until sunset, after which dry food. It reminds us of the preparation of those who were baptized on Theophany and partook Holy Communion the first time.

2. Multiple days fasts:

- **The Great Lent** (pre-Pascha, Quadragesimal; from „quadragesima" = 40) - kept because Christ fasted for 40 days before starting His missionary activity; to prepare us for the feast of the Resurrection of Christ; there are 7 weeks of fasting + the Cheesefare week. Great Friday and Great Saturday are days of total fast. It is the strictest fast. The services held during this fast remind us of the duty to repent in order to see the light of the Resurrection.

- **Nativity Fast** – November 15th – December 24th - reminds us of the Old Testament times, when the righteous ones from that time fasted (e.g. Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the Tables of the Law). The sermons during this fast include many prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. On Christmas Eve people keep total fast and the priests walk from house to house with the Nativity icon.

- **Apostles' Fast** - in remembrance of the fast kept by the Apostles before certain important actions (Acts 13:2; 14:23), but also for the strengthening in the gifts of Pentecost, because this fast always falls after Pentecost.

- **Dormition Fast** – August 1st – 14th, dedicated to the Mother of God.

- Let us not forget that keeping the fasts during the year, listed above, is a command of our Church, given for the benefit of the faithful's soul and body. Whoever does not fast, without a good reason and without the guidance of the father confessor, places himself outside the Church, by not tasting its spiritual joys.

Exercises:

a. Comment on the following quote:

"Fasting is the sign that we love God." ("Church Rule").

b. Find out on which days is fish allowed during Nativity Fast and write them in your notebook.

c. Bible reading: how did Christ teach us to fast? Matthew 6:16-18.

d. Reading from a contemporary spiritual father about fasting.

e. Prepare a menu for a regular fasting day.