

*"The head or chief of the virtues is prayer; their foundation is fasting.
Fasting is constant moderation in food with prudent discernment in its use.
Proud man! You think so much and so highly of your mind, while all the time it is in
complete and constant dependence on your stomach.
The law of fasting, though outwardly a law for the stomach, is essentially a law for the
mind.
The mind, that sovereign ruler in man, if it wishes to enter into its rights of autocracy and
retain them, must first submit to the law of fasting. Only then will it be constantly alert
and bright; only then can it rule over the desires of the heart and body. Only with
constant vigilance and temperance can the mind learn the commandments of the
Gospel and follow them. The foundation of the virtues is fasting."
Saint Ignatius Briantchaninov*

*"If you control your stomach, you will mount to Paradise; but if you do not control it, you
will be a victim of death."
Saint Basil the Great*

Fasting

Fasting is an important practice in the Orthodox Church that can be traced back to the time of Moses. It is found in both Scripture and Holy Tradition. It is considered to be an ascetic discipline. As such it has no redemptive value of its own. It is not a virtue, but is a discipline. When combined with other actions, it can help liberate the soul from its domination by the passions of the body. It is seen by our Church Fathers as a necessary discipline for us to attain the perfection to which God has called us. At the time of our creation He made us in His image¹ and Jesus tells us *"You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."*² In the Lord's Prayer He asks us to pray that His *"will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*³ We fast to help us carry out these directives from God so we can become perfected and join in union with Him to become capable of doing His will.

Consider the nature of our creation in the first part of the Book of Genesis.⁴ When Adam and Eve were created they were totally focused on God. Their soul was united with Him and the body was subservient to the soul. But they were influenced by the

¹ Genesis 1:26 "Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

² Matt 5:48

³ Matt 6:10

⁴ Genesis 2:15-17 Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 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 surely die."

snake to disregard God's commandment not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil. Instead they let their bodily desire for the tasty fruit become more important than God's direction to them.⁵ As a result they self-conscious, separated themselves from God, expelled from paradise, and suffered the consequence of death and suffering.⁶ This condition has been passed down to us from generation to generation in what is known as ancestral sin. God sent Jesus to show us through His life, Crucifixion and Resurrection how to restore this union and to enter paradise with eternal life with God. To return to our original condition of being in union with God, we must, with God's help, struggle with our tendency to sin for our personal salvation. The practice of fasting is an essential discipline that helps us in this struggle. It is part of the effort we must undertake to allow God's will to work through us.

An Ascetic Discipline

Fasting is one of several ascetic spiritual disciplines. The word askesis comes from a Greek word askesis (ἄσκησις) that originally referred in classical Greek to training, practice, exercise, or discipline. It was commonly used regarding the quest for athletic excellence, but was also applied to training for a profession, art or way of life. Later the Greek philosophers used it in regards to moral perfection to describe the act of refraining from vice and practicing virtue. Saint Paul used the image of a boxer when referring to his own efforts for self-discipline. *"I harden my body with blows and bring it under complete control, to keep myself from being disqualified after having called others to the contest".*⁷ Askesis can be translated as "spiritual discipline," "spiritual striving" or "spiritual training." The concept of asceticism acknowledges that there is a state of constant warfare going on between good and evil. Paul writes, *"Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. ...take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm."*⁸ Fasting is one of the disciplines that give us the armor needed in this battle. It is just like the physical exercises athletes undergo to become tops in their sport.

The war that Paul wants us to arm ourselves against is one that takes place between our ego-centered passions of the body and our desire for selfless service to God

⁵ Genesis 3:6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

⁶ Genesis 4:19 God said to Adam: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return."
Genesis 3:22 Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— 23 therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:26-27

⁸ Ephesians 6:11-13

through our love for Him and others. We have to recognize that rooted in our brain and its programming are uncountable number of neurons and their endless interconnections. These interconnections define predetermined actions about how to respond to different stimuli received through our five senses. Our body needs to take such shortcuts to deal with the infinite amount of inputs it receives from the surrounding world. These responses trigger, almost automatically, responses and emotions that lead us to act without requiring us to take the time to fully analyze the situation. These responses make up what we call the passions of the body. It is these seemingly automatic responses that we need to learn to control, which requires much effort on our part and cannot be fully conquered without God's help. It is these passions triggered by programming within our physical brain that need to be transformed to liberate the soul so it can choose a higher path that leads to our perfection and union with God.

Why is fasting such an important discipline to help us gain the necessary self-control to control these passions? Through fasting we learn to control one of our most basic desires, eating. The intake of food is essential for our survival so there is nothing inherently bad about eating. God gave us food and this desire so we could live an earthly life. We need this impulse so we will regularly nourish our body. But how we control this desire determines its benefit to us. If it is not controlled it will lead us to other excessive desires that are unacceptable to regain our union with God.

Saint Gregory of Sinai tells us the following:

The way to eat that is free from sin and pleasing to God has three degrees: abstinence, adequacy and satiety. To abstain means to remain a little hungry after eating; to eat adequately means neither to feel hungry nor weighed down. But eating beyond satiety is the door to gluttony through which lust comes in.

He is highlighting for us the reality that this desire for food needs to be kept within certain bounds. When we eat beyond what we need to fulfill our physical needs to remain healthy, "adequacy", we fall into a sin called gluttony. This can take the form of overeating or eating only what pleases us based on its sweetness, spiciness or other characteristics that gives us some kind of temporary pleasure, but not necessarily good health. Eating should be for maintaining the health of our body so we can be an effective instrument of God's love. Anything beyond this is a distortion of the desire that God gave us. Saint Gregory goes on to say that this is not the only reason to control our desire for food. In addition it leads to lust and other sinful ways. He is pointing out that when we focus on this fundamental desire for food, it also helps us to control other desires as well such as lust and greed. Proverbs gives us a similar message: "*The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite, But the stomach of the wicked is in need.*"⁹

Gluttony is an excessive craving for food. Lust is an excessive craving for anything of this world including sex as it is often applied to. Similarly, greed is the excessive desire to accumulate things of this world. Lust and greed like our uncontrolled desires for certain pleasure giving foods are never satisfied and therefore very dangerous. Apostle James writes, "*Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come*

⁹ Proverbs 13:25

from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain."¹⁰ You can see that there are many dire consequences of these unchecked desires including even murder. The Church Fathers tell us that these excesses are all related to our excessive desire for food. If we learn to control it we will be better able to control these other desires. All these sins separate us from God. As long as we cannot control them we are not on the path we desire for union with Him. Self-control, in relation to food, is a most needed fruit of the Holy Spirit and without it we cannot produce other fruits.

In today's world it is easy to fall into gluttonous behavior. Every kind of tantalizing food is at our fingertips. Obtaining whatever food we desire does not require much effort on our part other than driving to the store and picking it off the store's shelf. The stores are designed to encourage our inbred impulse, making it easy to load up our food cart with things that give us pleasure rather than good health. If we choose we can even pay for it with a credit card. We are constantly bombarded by advertising to stimulate this desire further. Our children are especially bombarded with this programming on the television and elsewhere. Our modern way of life has led to a very undisciplined way of eating and essentially giving in to the food demands of children, who are not really capable of making choices in the best interests of their health. We have become a nation of consumers of pleasure giving products and as such we suffer from many diseases that are the result of our poor eating habits.

At the root of gluttony is our own lack of self-control. As a result we are stimulated by advertisements, shelf placement and packaging of foods. Apostle James said, *"Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed."*¹¹ In other words, we have no one to blame but ourselves. We need to take responsibility for this situation and engage in the necessary disciplines that will allow us to gain the required self-control. If we don't, gluttony and other desires will adversely affect our character, lowering our resistance to further attacks by the negative forces, and limit our progress on the path to salvation. Paul says, *"Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense."*¹²

Fasting Is Scriptural

As has already been pointed out fasting is Scriptural. It is a practice that can be found in both the Old and New Testaments. Its practice as a spiritual aid has been recorded by Moses, the Prophets, Jesus, the Apostles and the Church Fathers.

Here are some excerpts from the Old Testament on fasting.

Moses

When I went up into the mountain to receive the tables of stone...I was in the

¹⁰ James 4:1-2

¹¹ James 1:14

¹² Romans 14:20

mountain forty days and forty nights, I ate no bread and drank no water.
Deuteronomy 9:9 (LXX)

Illness of David's child by Urias

"And David enquired of God concerning the child, and David fasted, and went in and lay all night upon the ground. II Kings 12:16 (LXX)

Prophet Elias:

And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights... III Kings 19:4-8 (LXX)

Priest Esdras called the Isralites to fast

"that we should humble ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a straight way for us." Esdras 8:21 (LXX)

Prophet Jonah:

It was by fasting among other things that the people of Nineveh were saved from his prediction of peril. Jonah 3:7 (LXX)

Book of Joel we see fasting associated with repentance,

"Now, therefore, saith the Lord your God, turn to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with lamentation. Joel 2:2 (LXX)

Prophet Daniel speaks of fasting as an aid in his appeal to God and the spiritual life:

And I set my face toward the Lord God, to seek him diligently by prayer and supplication, with fastings and sackcloth. And I Prayed to the Lord my God, and confessed... Daniel 9:3-4 (LXX)

Jesus Fasted

We know that Jesus fasted during His earthly life. Immediately after His Baptism He went into the wilderness and fasted. It is recorded, *"And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward hungry."* He instructs the Apostles on fasting when they complained to Him about the epileptic boy whose demon they could not cast out. He said to them, *"This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."*¹³ On another occasion when challenged about the fasting practices of His disciples, He said, *"Can the children of the bride-chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast."*¹⁴ He even gave instructions on how to fast. *He instructed, "when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face; That you appear not unto men to fast, but unto your Father which is in secret."*¹⁵ Here He is cautioning us not to be taken over by pride

¹³ Matthew 17:21

¹⁴ Matthew 9:15

¹⁵ Matthew. 6:17-18

in our discipline through fasting. It is something we do not to gain approval of others but only to humble ourselves in the eyes of God. It can be dangerous to our soul if we take pride in our efforts as it will destroy its benefits.

Apostles Fasted

The Apostles followed Christ's example by fasting and teaching others to fast. The Apostle Paul describes his own spiritual life as one of sacrifice, vigils, thirst, and fasting lived *"in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness."*¹⁶ He also refers to fasting in the context of marriage saying that by mutual consent husband and wife abstain from marital relations periodically while fasting and prayer.¹⁷ He is clearly indicating that fasting and prayer along with periodic and voluntary abstentions from sexual activity is a part of the spiritual life of Christian couples.

In the *Acts of the Apostles* we read: *"As they ministered (liturgical acts) to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."*¹⁸ This indicates that fasting was coupled with liturgical acts¹⁹ in the early Church. There is a first century document called the Didache²⁰, more commonly known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, which instructs the faithful: *"Your fasts must not be identical with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Mondays and Thursdays; but you should fast on Wednesdays and Fridays."*²¹ Here we see that fasting was a common practice from the Old Testament tradition that the disciples honored and taught, but with some modification. The fasting they referred to here was a complete abstention from both food and drink until sundown.

Church Fathers Fasted

The Church Fathers taught extensively about fasting. Ecclesiastical writer Tertullian (220 d.) notes that development of our spiritual life lies in confession and in prayer fed

¹⁶ 2 Cor 11:27

¹⁷ 1 Cor 7:5

¹⁸ Acts 13: 2-3

¹⁹ In this case they are describing the act of Ordination.

²⁰ The Didache (Koine Greek: Διδάχῃ, Didachē, meaning "Teaching"; IPA: /dɪdɛki/ in English, IPA: [ðiðaˈxi] in Modern Greek) is the common name of a brief early Christian treatise (dated by most scholars to the late first/early second century), containing instructions for Christian communities. The text, parts of which may have constituted the first written catechism, has three main sections dealing with Christian lessons, rituals such as baptism and eucharist, and Church organization. It was considered by some of the Church Fathers as part of the New Testament but rejected by others, eventually not accepted into the New Testament canon with the exception of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church "broader canon". The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church has accepted it as part of the collection of Apostolic Fathers. (Wikipedia)

²¹ Didache 8:1

by “fasting, ...not for the stomach’s sake, ...but for the soul’s.”²² Saint Gregory (391) talks of the practice of fasting before partaking of the Holy Eucharist. Saint Basil (379) wrote extensively on fasting. John Cassian (435) writes, “Therefore, fastings, vigils, meditation on the Scriptures, self-denial, and the abnegation of all possessions are not perfection, but aids to perfection: because the end of that science does not lie in these, but by means of these we arrive at the end.”²³ Saint Athanasius taught that fasting was more than about food in his Pascha letters that he used to give instructions to the Church of Alexandria on preparing for Pascha. He writes the following about the fast prior to Pascha,

*...let us vie with each other in observing the purity of the fast by watchfulness in prayers, by study of the Scriptures, by distributing to the poor, and let us be at peace with our enemies. Let us bind up those who are scattered abroad, banish pride, and return to lowliness of mind, being at peace with all men, and urging the brethren unto love.*²⁴

In other letters he referred to the pre-Paschal fast as a period of forty days. He also describes the benefits of fasting. It “...cures ills and dries up bodily humors, casts out demons and turns away evil thoughts; it makes the mind brighter, the heart clean, and the body holy; and it presents man before the Throne of God.”²⁵ Of special note here is the notion that it makes the mind brighter. Fasting does enhance our attentiveness and sharpens our mind so that it is more disposed to prayer. This is congruent with the findings of modern science. Harvard psychiatrist John Ratey, MD conducted research on people who fasted and found a “significant increase of activity in the motor cortex²⁶ during fasting.” When University of Chicago students fasted for seven days, mental alertness increased and their progress in schoolwork was cited as remarkable. The universal testimony of fasters is that thinking is enhanced.

There is an old Roman proverb that says, “a full stomach does not like to think.” This is well known to our Church Fathers. A full meal leaves one dull, unable to think clearly and often makes them stupid and sleepy and prone to sinful acts. It is a distraction from concentration on God and an effective prayer life. Serious followers of Christ learn to discipline their desire for food by eating lightly, often only one or two times each day. There is much to be said for the effects of fasting on the brain and senses. Thinking is sharper when hungry.

²² Tertullian, “On Repentance” Ante-Nicene Fathers vol 3, p 664

²³ Conferences, Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd set, vol II, p 298

²⁴ Letter XIV.

²⁵ Library of Greek Fathers and Ecclesiastical Writers, pp 62-63 - found in *Fasting in the Orthodox Church* by Archimandrite Akakios.

²⁶ Motor cortex is a term that describes regions of the cerebral cortex involved in the planning, control, and execution of voluntary motor functions.

Saint Athanasius also saw the fast periods as times to withdraw, for a short period, from our busy life to engage in practices that the monks benefited from, that we too need to practice to find union with God.

One of the most famous of the Church Fathers, Saint John Chrysostom wrote much on fasting. Here is a famous letter of Saint John Chrysostom on fasting instructing us to engage in more than just a restriction of food during a fast.

The value of fasting consists not only in avoiding certain foods, but in giving up of sinful practices. The person who limits his fast only to abstaining from meat is the one who especially lowers the value of it. Do you fast? Prove it by doing good works. If you see someone in need, take pity on them. If you see a friend being honored, don't get jealous of him or her. For a true fast, you cannot fast only with your mouth. You must fast with your eyes, your ears, your feet, your hands, and all parts of your body. You fast with your hands by keeping them pure from doing greedy things. You fast with your feet by not going to see forbidden shows or plays. You fast with your eyes by not letting them look upon impure pictures. Because if this is forbidden or unlawful, it mars your fast and threatens the safety of your soul. But if you look at things which are lawful and safe you increase your fast, for what you see with your eyes influences your conduct. It would be very stupid to eliminate or give up meat and other foods because of the fast but feed with your eyes upon other things which are forbidden. You don't eat meat, you say? But you allow yourself to listen to lewd things. You must fast with your ears, too. Another way of fasting with your ears is not to listen to those who speak evil or untrue things about others. "Thou shalt not receive an idle report. " This is especially true of rumors, gossip, untruths which are spoken to harm another. Besides fasting with your mouth by not eating certain foods, your mouth should also fast from foul language or telling lies about others. For what good is it if you don't eat meat or poultry, and yet you bite and devour your fellow man? ²⁷

It is important to remember that it is not just the discipline of giving up food that we desire. We seek to transform our behavior so that we can carry out the commands of God and live according to His will instead of one that merely satisfies our body's desires. Fasting is an important and necessary part of the work we must do, but the transformation we seek requires the action of the Holy Spirit. This will come only if we combine fasting with worship, prayer, and helping others out of a feeling of love.

In the modern Church we have among many others the teachings of Saint Neektarios (1920). He writes the following:

Fasting is an ordinance of the church, obliging the Christian to observe it on specific days. ...He who fasts for the uplifting of his mind and heart towards God shall be rewarded by God, Who is a most liberal bestower of divine gifts, for his devotion.

The purpose of fasting is chiefly spiritual: to provide an opportunity and preparation for spiritual works of prayer and meditation on the Divine through the complete abstinence from food, or the eating of uncooked food or frugal fare.

²⁷ Homily III:8 On the Statutes

However, fasting is no less valuable for physical health, since self-control and simplicity of life are necessary conditions of health and longevity, as dietetics tells us.²⁸

...unless one lifts his mind and heart towards God through Christian--not Pharisaic²⁹--fasting and through prayer, he cannot attain a consciousness of his sinful state and earnestly seek the forgiveness of sins.. Prayer and fasting-- Christian fasting-- serve as means of self-study, of discernment of our true moral state, of an accurate estimation of our sins and of a knowledge of their true character.³⁰

He is pointing out that following the fasting guidelines of the Church are not optional, but an obligation of every Church member. He says this not out of any need to control, but because fasting is of great benefit to our soul. He connects fasting with prayer and an attitude of repentance.

Fasting is good for us in so many ways. Not only does it help us in our daily life, but especially in our prayer life. It is a fundamental self-discipline that helps us break the dysfunctional links that exist in our brain and hold us to a sinful life. He points out that fasting increases self-reflection to examine our inner condition and see our sinfulness more clearly. When our blindness to our sinfulness is uncovered, we can change, our prayer life abounds, and we come closer to God.

Canons of the Church Deal with Fasting

There are also numerous canons of the Church which pertain to the issue of fasting. Some are listed here:

1. 69th Apostolic Canon: If a Bishop, Presbyter, Priest, Deacon, Subdeacon, Reader, or Chanter does not fast during the forty-day Lenten periods, on Wednesday and Friday, let him be deposed. The only exception is if he has been impeded from so doing by bodily illness. If he is a layman and does not fast, let him be excommunicated.
2. 29th Canon of the Sixth Ecumenical council affirms the necessity of following traditional fasting rules, noting that clergymen who celebrate the Eucharist must prepare for this service by fasting. Saint Nicodemos's interpretation of this Canon says that anyone approaching Holy Communion must abstain from food and drink from the midnight preceding the day on which he communes.

²⁸ Vol 7 of Modern Orthodox Saints, 2nd ed., pp 179-180

²⁹ The Pharisees were, depending on the time, a political party, a social movement, and a school of thought among Jews that flourished during the Second Temple Era (536 BC–70 AD). The Pharisees continued a form of Judaism that applied Jewish law to mundane daily-life activities in order to sanctify the every-day world. Jesus called them hypocrites because they preached living by the law but did not necessarily do so in their own lives. Because of the New Testament's frequent depictions of Pharisees as self-righteous rule-followers, the word "pharisee" (and its derivatives: "pharisaical", etc.) has changed in meaning and has come into semi-common usage in English to describe a hypocritical and arrogant person who places the letter of the law above its spirit. What he is implying here is that a Pharisee would pronounce the rules of fasting and then ignore them in his own life.

³⁰ Vol 7 of Modern Orthodox Saints, 2nd ed., p 182

3. 89th Canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council direct all Christians to fast during the week before Pascha and to refrain for all eating on Great Friday and Great Saturday.

4. The Council of Laodicea states that throughout the forty-day Lenten period, Christians should dedicate themselves to xerophagy, or a diet free from meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, and oil.

5. One of the Canons of Saint Peter the Hieromartyr (311) defends the practice of fasting on Wednesday and Friday and honoring the day of the Resurrection, Sunday, as a festal day free of fasting.

6. Saturdays and Sundays, except during Lent, are not fast days: "If any of the clergy be found fasting on the Lord's Day, or on the Sabbath, excepting the one only, let him be deposed. If a layman, let him be excommunicated" (Canon 66 of the Apostles; cf. Canon 18 of Synod of Gangra).

7. Sixth Ecumenical Synod in Trullo. It reads: "Fasting was devised in order to humble the body. If, therefore, the body is already in a state of humbleness and illness or weakness, the person ought to partake of as much as he or she may wish and be able to get along with food and drink" (Canon 8 of St. Timothy; cf. Canon 69 of the Apostles; cf. Canon 10 of St. Timothy).

From these examples we can see that the Holy Canons along with Scripture and Patristic traditions support fasting.³¹

Even though the specific practice of fasting has varied from time to time, fasting has always been part of the Christian Tradition as a necessary discipline for our spiritual benefit. In summary, the Orthodox Church has always seen fasting as a tool to combat the passions, clear our minds, intensify our prayers, and to open the door to the renewal by the Holy Spirit.

How Do We Fast?

To put fasting in perspective with today's world, let's examine the eating customs at the time of Jesus and the Apostles. People in the Roman Empire in the first century existed primarily on bread and vegetables. Each day the woman of the household would grind grain, bake bread, milk the animals, and make cheese. They typically ate two meals. Breakfast was a light meal and dinner was the main meal consisting of cheese, wine, vegetables and fruits, and eggs. In areas near the sea or lakes fish was most common, followed by chicken or fowl. Beef and lamb were only served on special occasions. Pork was forbidden. Commonly the foods were cooked in a large pot and seasoned with salt, onions, garlic, cumin, coriander, mint, dill, and mustard. Food was sweetened with wild honey or syrups from dates or grapes. Meat generally was eaten only by the wealthy on a regular basis because of its cost. There was no means of refrigeration and meat was normally kept "on the hoof" until it was to be consumed. Also, meat was thought to "excite" the body because of the blood in it. Digesting meat was seen as requiring more effort of the body and caused the passions to be stirred up. There were even Christians who condemned outright the eating of meat. This view was condemned

³¹ Archimandrite Akakios, *Fasting in the Orthodox Church*, pp 28 - 30

at the Synod of Gangra³² in 340 A.D. ³³ The Church prohibits the exclusion of meat from a diet on religious grounds as it is a gift from God.

Throughout the history of the Church different foods have been seen as permitted or not permitted on fasting days. During Lent and other fast periods commonly "dry eating" without the use of olive oil or wine was observed. Olive oil was used in cooking so the elimination of oil limited people to boiled or uncooked foods. On some days oil was permitted. On feast days all foods including fish were permitted. In areas where meat was scarce and fish was more commonly eaten a differentiation was made between fish and shellfish when it came to fast days.

Current fasting practices reflect the monastic practices that developed in the Byzantine Empire. After the time of Iconoclasm in the 8th century these monastic practices became very popular even among clergy and faithful because of their victory over the iconoclasts³⁴. The monastic rules of fasting were widely accepted, although there has been great leeway in their interpretation.

The food used during fasting periods should be simple and plain and not extravagant. It should not be prepared to satisfy our craving for certain tastes, but to give us a chance to break from our automatic response to food, giving thanks to the provider, our Lord, and to increase our self-control. The more one puts time and effort into their preparation, the more its fasting value is value is reduced. As the Apostle Paul tells us: *"For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*³⁵ The fast is a time to live simply, to give what is normally consumed to

³² In Christian times Gangra (Çankırı is capital city of Çankırı Province, in Turkey, about 140 km (87 mi) northeast of Ankara.) was the metropolitan see of Paphlagonia. In the 4th century the town was the scene of an important ecclesiastical synod, the Synod of Gangra. Conjectures as to the date of this synod vary from 341 to 376. All that can be affirmed with certainty is that it was held about the middle of the 4th century. The synodal letter states that twenty-one bishops assembled to take action concerning Eustathius (of Sebaste?) and his followers, who condemned marriage, disparaged the offices of the church, held conventicles of their own, wore a peculiar dress, denounced riches, and affected especial sanctity. The synod condemned the Eustathian practices, declaring however, with remarkable moderation, that it was not virginity that was condemned, but the dishonouring of marriage; not poverty, but the disparagement of honest and benevolent wealth; not asceticism, but spiritual pride; not individual piety, but dishonouring the house of God. The twenty canons of Gangra were declared ecumenical by the Council of Chalcedon, 451.

³³ *A History of Fasting*, By The Very Rev. Protopresbyter Lawrence Barriger

³⁴ Iconoclast were those who sought to destroy religious [icons](#). Emperor Leo III the Isaurian (reigned 717–741) banned the use of icons of [Jesus](#), [Mary](#), and the [saints](#) and commanded the destruction of these images in 730. The first iconoclastic period came to an end when [Leo IV](#) (Constantine V's son) died and his widow, Empress [Irene](#), came into power. An [iconophile](#), she initiated the [Second Council of Nicea](#) in 787, at which the veneration of icons was affirmed, although the worship of icons was expressly forbidden. Among the reasons were the doctrine of the [Incarnation](#): because God the Son (Jesus Christ) took on flesh, having a physical appearance, it is now possible to use physical matter to depict God the Son and to depict the saints.

³⁵ Romans 14:7

the poor, and to use the extra time for prayer.

Church Fasting Guidelines.

There are four levels of severity of a fast. At the first level is abstention from meat. Next level we also abstain from all animal products like milk, butter and cheese. Then becoming even more strict we abstain from fish. Finally we also abstain from oil and wine. So during the strictest of fast we should not have meat products, fish or any oil or wine. Generally at this strict level we would also restrict our cooking since we do not have oil to cook with. All fasts include at least abstention from meat. This is the minimal restriction you should consider to follow on a designated fasting day. No meat means no meat. It does not mean just red meat and, yes, chicken is meat.

Every week we fast on Wednesday and Friday. As was mentioned earlier this is similar to the traditional Jewish fast, but the Christians moved it from Monday and Thursday to Wednesday and Friday. Wednesday represents the day of Judas' betrayal and Friday the Crucifixion of Jesus. The normal fast on these days is the strictest level. Occasionally it will be modified to include oil and wine or to include even fish if it is a major feast day. There are some exceptions that will be explained later.

There is also a fast before taking communion. To properly prepare for communion you need to make a confession of your sinfulness and refrain from eating or drinking from midnight to the time you take Holy Communion. This allows you to come cleansed to receive the Holy Eucharist and with a hunger for union with God. You might say you are preparing in anticipation of the greatest meal of them all, the Mystical Supper of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The official fasting guidelines are contained in a article "Fasting From Iniquities and Foods" which can be found on the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America web site.³⁶ Here is an excerpt from that article:

The official program of the Orthodox Church today for the duration of time and the selection of foods for fasting is as follows:

- The **Great Lent** begins Monday after Sunday of Cheese, the fifth week before Holy Week, and lasts through Saturday of Lazarus, and continues through **Holy Week**. Abstention from meat, fish and dairy products is observed, except on Palm Sunday and the Annunciation, March 25, when fish may be eaten. On Saturday and Sunday of Lent, wine, oil and shellfish may be eaten. This selection of foods is applied to the other fast periods, below, except when indicated otherwise.

- Fasting before **Christmas** is for 40 days, from November 15 through December 24, during which period fish may be eaten.
- Fasting of the **Holy Apostles** starts on Monday after the Sunday of All Saints Day and ends on June 29th, the celebration of Apostles Peter and Paul.

³⁶ <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8125>

- August 1 to 15 is for the **Repose (Dormition) of Theotokos**. Wednesday and Friday of each week.
- The day before the **Epiphany**, January 5.
- The day of the **Beheading of John the Forerunner**, August 29.
- The day of the **Exaltation of the Cross**, September 14.

A person who is ill or weak in body should however strive all the harder to abstain from sins. For the sick or the weak in body, in accordance with the definition of fasting by St. Timothy, it is proper that a minimum of fasting be observed when they are not strong enough to endure the strict fasting from foods observed mostly by monks and nuns.

The official regulation of fasting depends upon the synods of the Orthodox Church. The pace of life and circumstances of today require a change in the fasting observances of the Church. The suggested **minimum** fasting in duration and in foods which might be abstained by **those who are weak in body** is:

1. First week of Lent and that of Holy Week;
2. One week before Christmas;
3. Two days before Holy Apostles Day (June 29);
4. One day before the Transfiguration of Christ (August 6);
5. Two days before the Repose of Theotokos (August 15);
6. Friday around the year;
7. One day before the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14).

During all fast periods those of sound health abstain from meat, fish and all dairy products is observed, except when fish is permitted. The use of vegetable oils is permitted during fast periods, although olive oil may be consumed only on Saturdays and Sundays of Lent. Imitation foods such as margarine and vegetable products of all kinds may be classified as fast foods. Some sea foods (shrimp, oyster, lobster, crab meat, octopus) invertebrate shellfish are considered permissible fast foods.

Children should be instructed as to the purpose and meaning of church observances such as the procedures of fasting. Children should be taught the ideals of abstention from foods and from iniquities and their relationship to prayer, alms-giving, self-control and love. Children of sound health should fast. The main purpose of children fasting is to make them aware that fasting is a dedication and pledge to obey the principles of faith in Christ. Infants are not required to fast. However, the feeding of infants should take place at least two or three hours before Holy Communion.

There are also fast free periods. Holy Week is followed by Bright Week during which there are no food restrictions even on Wednesday and Friday. This is considered to be a period of celebration of the Resurrection. Following the Nativity fast and the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus there is a fast free period that lasts until the eve of the Theophany (the twelve days of Christmas). Another fast free period is the week following Pentecost often called Trinity week. Also Saturdays and Sundays are to be held as fast free.

In cases of uncertainty each should seek the advice of his or her spiritual father. At all times it is essential to bear in mind that 'you are not under the law but under grace' (Rom. 6: 14), and that 'the letter kills, but the spirit gives life' (2 Cor. 3: 6). The rules of fasting, while they need to be taken seriously, are not to be interpreted with dour and pedantic legalism; 'for the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14: 17).³⁷

Remember, fasting is not a negative practice. It is not meant to confine spirituality within a set of laws, nor meant to punish the body. It is a constructive adherence to a practical therapy to cure spiritual illness. It is definitely not a rejection of certain foods, but a realignment of our attitude towards food and the body to help us overcome the passions of the body.

Local Customs

You may observe some laxness in observing these fasting guidelines in a local Orthodox parish. Why is fasting not followed strictly today in some Orthodox parishes? This is not a practice condoned by the Church. Here are some possible reasons. There is a slackness of immigrants who established the Orthodox Church in this country. Coming from a war torn country and small villages many may have been ignorant of the Church fasting guidelines. There is definitely the negative influence of Western ideas and customs on Orthodox Christians. Western churches have for the most part abandoned fasting. The Western culture had a large influence on the immigrants who came to this country to start a new life free from the "old country" traditions that were frequently seen as backward or superstitious. They often came from places where there was a lack of political freedom as well. To many, coming to the United States represented "freedom" from religious as well as governmental restrictions. The forces against spiritual disciplines such as fasting are even stronger today. Presently, material well being has become the goal for most Americans. Self-gratification has become the main aim of life for many. Discipline is practiced for advancement in this material world, for physical fitness, or a sexually attractive body. Discipline for spiritual growth is not commonly practiced. Many try to make Orthodoxy fit in with a life that validates the body and its pleasures, promotes acquisition of wealth and possessions, and enhances the ego. We too often seek a glorification of a human life without any pain that is necessary for its spiritual transformation. Some call this "Easy" Christianity. The traditions handed down by the Apostles are disregarded in favor of building large congregations, retaining

³⁷ THE MEANING OF THE GREAT FAST BY MOTHER MARY AND BISHOP KALLISTOS WARE
From The Lenten Triodion (pp.13-37)

the younger generation, and a more social community than one dedicated to spiritual growth and development. The aim too often seems to be material well being and happiness and not union with God. Too often the goal of fasting is lost among these modern superficial views of human kind. We erroneously do not view ourselves as sinners or see that our souls are in danger.

It is not wise for us to invent our own rules for fasting. Unfortunately, today very few follow the official Church fasting regulations. If you find them too strict then you should consult with your spiritual Father for his advice on a good fasting program for you. It is important to make an effort to follow the Church fasting guidelines. These guidelines have been established by the Church in her wisdom, because she knows this is what we all need for our spiritual growth. Hopefully it is a regimen that you can grow into. If you are able, try and follow the pattern given to us through Holy Tradition. It contains the collective conscience of the people of God.

If you are not currently fasting accept that it is difficult to change your behaviors. Changing even the smallest of eating habits can be very difficult. To fast you have to make a clear personal decision to fast. Pray for God's help. Begin with a commitment to give up eating meat on Wednesday and Friday. That is EVERY Wednesday and Friday. Think about what you will eat instead. Plan ahead. Instead of a hamburger or chicken sandwich have a fish sandwich. If you use frozen lunches you can substitute vegetarian ones. If you cook seek out vegetarian recipes. After a few weeks try and give up other animal products such as dairy products on Wednesday and Friday. Remember, you can substitute vegetable products such as soy milk and margarine or the simulated meats made from soy beans. Remember the idea is to add discipline to your life and to overcome a domination of your bodily desires over your soul so you free yourself to engage in prayer and to do good for others. As long as you remain conscious of your effort and keep at it, the Lord will help you build a new habit and it will become a useful cycle in your daily life. This will then prepare you to enter into the longer fasts. During the Lenten period it is especially important to follow the fasting guidelines. You will find that Holy Week and Pascha have a whole new meaning when you do. If you have children bring them into the fast as well so it can become a whole family project. This will give you an opportunity to talk about God as part of your meals on Wednesdays and Fridays. Engage them in thinking up recipes for these days. Maybe on these days you can also make a special effort to reach out to help a friend or neighbor who is sick or in need of something. Have a special prayer for meal time and be sure to follow your daily prayer rule. Ask God for help in following the fast. On Sunday morning, don't make that cup of coffee or reach for the muffin or whatever is your normal breakfast fare so you can be prepared to partake of Holy Communion that day. This will aid you in your fasting as will your fasting help you to be properly prepared for Holy Communion. We come to the Divine Liturgy to participate and to receive the Blood and Body of Christ. This is the purpose of the liturgy. Orthodoxy is a way of life and the practice of fasting is one of the actions that will help you develop a life style that will take you closer to God helping you to deal with all the trial and tribulations of normal life in this world.

Fasting is only a means to an end. It is not a virtue. Engage in it to grow spiritually and walk the path towards Salvation.

Note: Always, consult your spiritual father for help in determining a proper personal fasting program.