

## Rules of fasting during the Great Lent - What precisely do the rules of fasting demand?

Neither in ancient nor in modern times has there ever been exact uniformity, but most Orthodox authorities agree on the following rules:

**During the week between the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee and that of the Prodigal Son**, there is a general dispensation from all fasting. Meat and animal product may be eaten even on Wednesday and Friday.

**In the following week...**the usual fast is kept on Wednesday and Friday. Otherwise there is no special fasting.

**In the week before Lent**, meat is forbidden, but eggs, cheese and other dairy products (as well as fish) may be eaten on all days, including Wednesday and Friday.

**On weekdays (Monday to Friday inclusive) during the seven weeks of Lent**, there are restrictions both on the number of meals taken daily and on the types of food permitted; but when a meal is allowed, there is no fixed limitation on the quantity of food to be eaten.

**On weekdays in the first week**, fasting is particularly severe. According to strict observance, in the course of the five initial days of Lent, only two meals are eaten, one on Wednesday and the other on Friday, in both cases after the Liturgy of the Presanctified. On the other three days, those who have the strength are encouraged to keep an absolute fast; those for whom this proves impracticable may eat on Tuesday and Thursday (but not, if possible, on Monday), in the evening after Vespers, when they may take bread and water, or perhaps tea or fruit-juice, but not a cooked meal. It should be added at once, that in practice today, these rules are commonly relaxed. At the meals on Wednesday and Friday *xerophagy* is prescribed. Literally this means 'dry eating'. Strictly interpreted, it signifies that we may eat only vegetables cooked with water and salt, and also such things as fruit, nuts, bread and honey. In practice, octopus and shell-fish are also allowed on days of xerophagy; likewise vegetable margarine and corn or other vegetable oil, not made from olives. But the following categories of food are definitely excluded:

1. meat;
2. animal products (cheese, milk, butter, eggs, lard, drippings);
3. fish (i.e., fish with backbones);
4. oil (i.e., olive oil) and wine (i.e., all alcoholic drinks).

**On weekdays (Monday to Friday inclusive) in the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth weeks**, one meal a day is permitted, to be taken in the afternoon following Vespers, and at this one meal xerophagy is to be observed.

**Holy Week.** On the first three days there is one meal each day, with xerophagy; but some try to keep a complete fast on these days, or else they eat only uncooked food, as on the opening days of the first week. On Holy Thursday one meal is eaten, with wine and oil (i.e., olive oil). On Great Friday those who have the strength follow the practice of the early Church and keep a total fast. Those unable to do this may eat bread, with a little water, tea or fruit-juice, but not until sunset, or at any rate not until after the veneration of the [Plashchanitsa] at Vespers. On Holy Saturday there is in principle no meal, since according to the ancient practice after the end of the Liturgy of St. Basil the faithful remained in church for the reading of the Acts of the Apostles, and for their sustenance were given a little bread and dried fruit, with a cup of wine. If, as usually happens now, they return home for a meal, they may use wine but not oil; for on this one Saturday, alone among Saturdays of the year, olive oil is not permitted.

The rule of xerophagy is relaxed on the following days:

1. On **Saturdays and Sundays in Great Lent**, with the exception of Holy Saturday, two main meals may be taken in the usual way, around mid-day and in the evening, with wine and olive oil. Meat, animal products and fish are not allowed.
2. On **the Feast of the Annunciation** (March 25) and **Palm Sunday** fish is permitted as well as wine and oil, but meat and animal products are not allowed.
3. Wine and oil are permitted on the following days, if they fall on a weekday in the second, third, fourth, fifth or sixth week: [**First and Second Finding of the Head of St. John the Baptist** (Feb. 24), **Rest of St. Raphael** (Feb. 27), **Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste** (Mar. 9), **Forefeast of the Annunciation** (Mar. 24), **Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel** (Mar. 26), **Rest of St. Innocent** (Mar. 31), **Rest of St. Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow** (Apr. 7), **Holy Greatmartyr and Victorybearer George** (Apr. 23), **Holy Apostle and Evangelist Mark** (Apr. 25), as well as **the Patronal Feast** of the church or monastery].
4. Wine and oil are also allowed on **Wednesday and Thursday of the Fifth Week**, because of the Vigil for the Great Canon. Wine is allowed and, according to some authorities, oil as well on Friday in the same week, because of the Vigil for the Akathist Hymn.

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## Fasting

Seeing that bodily disposition is important in worship and spiritual life, in general, great emphasis is placed in the Orthodox Church on fasting; if one should add up all of the fasting seasons and days of the Church calendar, he would find that more than half of the year is devoted to this ascetic labor. The question might rightfully be asked, then, as to why this is so.

According to St. Basil the Great, Adam, the first-created man, loving God of his own free will, dwelt in the heavenly blessedness of communion with God, in the angelic state of prayer and fasting. The cause of this first man's fall was his free will; by an act of disobedience he violated the vow of abstinence and broke the living union of love with God. That is, he held in scorn the heavenly obligations of prayer and fasting by eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Lack of abstinence, then, was the cause of the Fall and, as a result, because of this original greed, the soul becomes dimmed, and is deprived of the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Our Lord Jesus Christ calls all of us to salvation through self-denial (Luke 14:26) and this is addressed to the free will of fallen man: If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me (Matt. 16:24). Thus, the Savior calls man to the voluntary fulfillment of those heavenly obligations, which he freely forsook, of observing prayer and fasting.

Repentance without fasting is made ineffectual since fasting is the beginning of repentance. The aim of bodily fasting is the enslavement of the flesh, for fasting bridles the lust of the stomach and of that below the stomach, meaning the removal of the passions, the mortification of the body and the destruction of the sting of lust. Thus it is necessary to overcome the stomach for the healing of the passions.

The personal example of the Lord Himself bears witness to the absolute necessity of bodily fasting. Did not the Savior fast for forty days and nights after His baptism to prepare for His earthly ministry (Matt. 4:2)? So too, many of the Saints of the Church were especially noted for their ascetic labors, which saw fasting as being of especially great importance.

In fasting the flesh and the spirit struggle one against the other. Therefore bodily fasting leads to the triumph of the spirit over the body, and gives a man power over the stomach, subdues the flesh and permits it not to commit fornication and uncleanness. Abstinence is the mother of cleanliness, the giver of health and is good for rich and poor, sick and healthy, alike. It strengthens the seeker after godliness in spiritual battles and proves to be a formidable weapon against evil spirits. As the Lord Himself said, concerning the casting-out of certain demons: This kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting (Matt. 17:21).

**This fasting, however, is not to be done out of pride or self-will; It must be observed in the praise of God and must be in accordance with the canons of the Church, since it consists in the complete renunciation of self-will and of the desires.** At the same time, we must realize that for fallen man to attain perfection, even intensive fasting is insufficient, if in his soul he does not abstain from those things which further sin. Fasting is not only the abstinence from food, but also from evil thoughts and all passion, for, as the Savior says: Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man... (Matt. 15:17-20). **Thus exterior fasting, without the corresponding interior fasting is in vain.**

## Fasting Rules

The fasting rules, found for the most part in the Typikon (mainly Chapters 32 and 33), and repeated in appropriate places of the Menaion and Triodion, are dependent on the Church's cycle of feasts and fasts. In general, with a few exceptions, all **Wednesdays and Fridays** (Mondays also, in some monasteries) **are kept as days of fasting, with no meat, eggs, dairy products, fish, wine or oil to be eaten.** This includes, as well, the four canonical fasting periods (**Great Lent, the Apostles' Fast, the Nativity Fast and the Dormition Fast**), and certain other days, including the **Eve of Theophany, the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, and the Elevation of the Cross.** It must be noted, however, that there are many local variations in the allowances of wine and oil (and sometimes fish), such as on patronal feast days of a parish or monastery, or when the feast of a great Saint (or Saints) is celebrated which has particular local or national significance.

While most Orthodox Christians are perhaps aware of the rules of fasting for Great Lent, Wednesdays and Fridays, the rules for the other fasting periods are less known. During the **Dormition Fast**, wine and oil

are allowed only on Saturdays and Sundays (and sometimes on a few feast days and vigils). During the **Apostles' Fast** and the **Nativity Fast**, the general rules are as follows (from Chapter 33 of the Typikon):

*It should be noted that in the Fast of the Holy Apostles and of the Nativity of Christ, on Tuesday and Thursday we do not eat fish, but only oil and wine. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday we eat neither oil nor wine.... On Saturday and Sunday we eat fish. If there occur on Tuesday or Thursday a Saint who has a Doxology, we eat fish; if on Monday, the same; but if on Wednesday or Friday, we allow only oil and wine.... If it be a Saint who has a Vigil on Wednesday or Friday, or the Saint whose temple it is, we allow oil and wine and fish.... But from the 20th of December until the 25th, even if it be Saturday or Sunday, we do not allow fish.*

In another place the Typikon prescribes that if the Eve of Theophany or the Eve of the Nativity fall on Saturday or Sunday, wine and oil are permitted.

**It has always been held that these rules of fasting should be relaxed in the case of anyone elderly or in poor health.** Personal facts also need to be taken into account, as, for example, the situation of an isolated Orthodox living in the same household as non-Orthodox, or one obliged to take meals in a factory or school lunchroom. In cases of uncertainty, however, one should always seek the advice of his or her spiritual father.

**At all times, however, it is essential to bear in mind that you are not under law but under grace** (Rom. 6:14), and that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6). The fasting rules, while they do need to be taken seriously, are not to be interpreted with the strict legalism of the Pharisees of Holy Scripture, for the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

## Jesus Himself fasted and taught His disciples to fast.

*And when you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men, but your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.* (Matthew 6:16-18)

The purpose of fasting is to gain mastery over oneself and to conquer the passions of the flesh. It is to liberate oneself from dependence on the things of this world in order to concentrate on the things of the Kingdom of God. It is to give power to the soul so that it would not yield to temptation and sin. According to St. Seraphim, fasting is an "indispensable means" of gaining the fruit of the Holy Spirit in one's life (cf. Conversation with Motovilov), and Jesus Himself taught that some forms of evil cannot be conquered without it (Matthew 17:21, Mark 9:29)

Man does not fast because it pleases God if His servants do not eat, for, as the lenten hymns of the Church remind us, "the devil also never eats." (Lenten Triodion) Neither do men fast in order to afflict themselves with

suffering and pain, for God has no pleasure in the discomfort of His people. Neither do men fast with the idea that their hunger and thirst can somehow serve as a "reparation" for their sins. Such an understanding is never given in the scriptures or the writings of the saints which claim that there is no "reparation" for man's sin but the crucifixion of Christ. Salvation is a **"free gift of God"** which no "works" of man can accomplish of merit. (cf. Romans 5:15-17, Ephesians 2:8-9)

Men fast, therefore, and must fast, only to be delivered from carnal passions so that the free gift of salvation in Christ might produce great fruit in their lives. Men fast so that they might more effectively serve God who loves them and has saved them in Christ and the Spirit. Fasting without effort in virtue is wholly in vain.

## Fasting Seasons and Days

### FASTING SEASONS

1. Nativity (St. Philip's Fast) - Nov. 15 through Dec. 24
2. Meatfast - Monday after the Sunday of Last Judgment through Cheesefare Sunday
3. Great Lent & Holy Week - 1st Monday of Great Lent through Great and Holy Saturday
4. Apostles' (Peter & Paul) Fast - June 11 through June 28
5. Dormition (Theotokos) Fast - Aug. 1 through Aug. 14

### FAST-FREE WEEKS

1. Afterfeast of the Nativity of Christ to Theophany Eve - Dec. 25 through Jan. 4
2. The week following the Sunday of the Publican & Pharisee - 2nd Week of the Lenten Triodion
3. Bright Week - The week after Pascha until St Thomas Sunday
4. Trinity Week - The week after Pentecost until the Saturday before All Saints Sunday

### FAST DAYS

1. The Wednesdays and Fridays of the Year, except for Fast-Free Weeks
2. The Eve of Theophany - January 5
3. The Beheading of St. John the Baptist - August 29
4. The Elevation of the Cross - September 14