

Homily on “Fasting” -- Seven Questions, Seven Answers

His Grace, Michael ~ Bishop of New York & the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

Question #1: Why do we fast?

Answer: Just as the children of Israel ate the “bread of affliction” (Deuteronomy 16:3) in preparation for the Passover, so Christians prepare themselves for the celebration of Pascha by observing the fast of Great Lent. Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28), and Elijah on Mount Horeb (I Kings 19:8-12). But most importantly Our Lord fasted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights (Matthew 4:1-2) and we imitate His example.

Question #2: But, did Jesus really teach fasting?

Answer: Yes, He instructs us, “When the Bridegroom is taken away, My disciples will fast” (Matthew 9:15). And He presumes His followers will fast, in His Sermon on the Mount when He teaches, “When you fast ...” not if you fast. He goes on to say, “Anoint your head and wash your face so that you do not appear to be fasting before men ... your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matthew 6:16-18).

Question #3: When did fasting on certain days originate?

Answer: As early as the first century, in the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, we read: “He (Christ) commanded us to fast on Wednesday and Friday.” The Saints explain, we fast “on Wednesday because on this day Our Lord was betrayed; and on Friday because on this day He suffered death for our salvation.”

Question #4: What is the purpose of fasting?

Answer: Although fasting has many health benefits, the primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence on God. We voluntarily experience physical hunger in order to become aware of our true spiritual hunger. Another reason we fast is to subdue our passions and self-will. The Saints tell us there is no way we can control our urges for pleasure, money or power, if we cannot control our stomach. Fasting is the first step toward self-control. And our self-will is cut off by being obedient to the Church and her rules.

Question #5: Is fasting only a matter of diet?

Answer: No, it is moral as well as physical. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal Son to our Father’s house. In the words of Saint John Chrysostom it means “abstinence not only from food but from sins.” He says, “The fast should be kept not only by the mouth but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and the other members of the body.” The eye must abstain from impure sights; the ear, from malicious gossip; the hands,

from acts of injustice. Saint Basil says “it is useless to fast from food and yet indulge in cruel criticism and slander: You do not eat meat but devour your brother.” And although we may return to eating meat and cheese after Pascha comes, we should of course strive NOT to return to the sins from which we struggled to abstain during the course of the Fast. We give up rich foods for Lent ... We should give up gossip and laziness and greed, forever.

Question #6: What is the inner significance of fasting?

Answer: The deepest meaning of fasting is best summed up in the triad: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Fasting is valueless if not combined with prayer. In the Gospel, Our Lord tells us that the devil is cast out by “prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21); and Acts of the Apostles records the early Christians “fasted and prayed” (Acts 13: 3). The Great Fast is certainly a time to improve our prayer life, both personally at home, and by our participation in Lenten services at church.

Question #7: And what about almsgiving?

Answer: Prayer and fasting should be accompanied by almsgiving – by love for others expressed in practical form. The second century Shepherd of Hermas insists that the money saved from abstaining from rich foods during the fast should be given to the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Lent is certainly the time to increase our works of mercy for “the least of His brethren,” for those who are in need.

So, as we begin Great Lent, let our hearts sing out this hymn of the Church:

Let us set out with joy upon the season of the Fast, and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us purify our soul and cleanse our flesh; and as we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit, may we persevere with love.