

Reflections On Fasting During Great Lent

Last Updated Saturday, 08 March 2008

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There always seems to be requests that some guidelines be given for Fasting during the season of Great Lent. This is especially needed since in a Pan-Orthodox parish like ours, each of the ethnic groups seem to have a different way of Fasting.

It must first be said that few of us really "fast." We may name it "fasting," but what we do is ABSTAIN from certain foods since "Fasting" with reference to food, really means not to eat at all! Fasting has always been practiced in the Scripture and in the Church. However, it is never isolated from other aspects of our Christian living, e.g., attending the services, our prayer life, our works of charity, etc. Also, Fasting is never an end unto itself: it is always a MEANS to an end, namely FREEDOM, i.e., to be free FROM and free FOR. It is to make a statement (spiritually and physically) that we are free FROM the "things" of this world in order to be free FOR communion for God.

In a sense, it means that we are not held in bondage to anything of this world. And that is why MORE than "food" and "recipes" are involved! Indeed, this is why St. John Chrysostom reminds us that Fasting has more to do with what comes OUT of the mouth, as what we eat. Thus, in the Eastern Christian spirituality, Fasting is much more a Christian "attitude" than a set of laws. We USE food in Fasting because food is the "medium," the "vehicle," through which we may touch all the other realities of this life; we cannot live without it. Therefore, in making a statement through food, we make a statement about this life.

If this is clear in our minds, then, how CAN we make this "statement" through this medium of food? What practical guidelines DO we have? The answer during Lent is CHANGE! After all, Great Lent is a time for "change and increase." First, there is absolutely nothing wrong with children doing it by relinquishing their favorite sweets; it's THEIR way of making this statement. Second, as history has shown, every family in every culture has always found a different way to express this; there has never been only one way! In the Middle East it was done one way, in Greece another, in the Slavic lands another, in Rome still another. But, wherever it was practiced, the point always remained: if Lent represents a "change," (and parents: it will BE a change only if we MAKE it a change in our families!) then our Fasting should show it. If your custom has been to fast from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays during the rest of the year, (which has been the Apostolic practice), add Mondays during Lent. Others do not eat meat all during Lent, and still others eat meat only on week-ends. But the REAL issue is that your family should AGREE that this way represents the "change" needed to make a statement that we are in that season which leads us to Holy Week and the glorious Resurrection! It is critical that we not allow Great Lent to pass us by as if it is no different than any other time of the year!