

FASTING AND THE GREAT FAST

THE TRIODION

The Great Fast is the 40-day season of spiritual preparation that comes before the most important Feast of the Christian year, Holy Pascha (*which means "Passover" and is commonly called "Easter"*). It is the central part of a larger time of preparation called the *Triodion* season.

The *Triodion* is divided into three main parts: Pre-Lenten weeks of preparing our hearts, the six weeks of Lent, and Holy Week. The main theme of the *Triodion* is repentance—mankind's return to God, our loving Father.

This annual season of repentance is a spiritual journey with our Saviour. Our goal is to meet the risen Lord Jesus, Who reunites us with God the Father. The Father is always waiting to greet us with outstretched hands. We must ask ourselves the question, "Are we willing to turn to Him?"

During The Great Fast, the Church teaches us how to receive Him by using the two great means of repentance— prayer and fasting.

THE GREAT FAST

The word "fast" means not eating all or certain foods. As faithful, we can fast completely at certain times of great importance, and especially each time before receiving Holy Communion. Usually, fasting means limiting the number of meals and/or the type of food eaten.

The purpose of fasting is to remind us of the Scriptural teaching, "Man does not live by bread alone." The needs of the body are nothing compared to the needs of the soul. Above all else, we need God, Who provides everything for both the body and the soul. Fasting teaches us to depend on God more fully.

The first sin of our parents, Adam and Eve, was eating from the forbidden tree (*Genesis 3:1-19*). We fast from food, or a food item, as a reminder that we are to fast from sinning and doing evil.

There are several benefits of fasting. Fasting helps us pray more easily. Our spirit is lighter when we are not weighed down by too much food or food that is too rich. Through fasting, we also learn to feel compassion for the poor and hungry and to save our own resources so that we can help those in need.

Fasting is more than not eating food. Saint John Chrysostom teaches that it is more important to fast from sin. For example, besides controlling what goes into our mouths, we must control what comes out of our mouths as well. Are our words pleasing to God, or do we curse God or our brother?

The other members of the body also need to fast: our eyes from seeing evil; our ears from hearing evil; our limbs from participating in anything that is not of God. Most important of all, we need to control our thoughts, for thoughts are the source of our actions, whether good or evil.

Fasting is not an end in itself. Our goal is an inner change of heart. The Great Fast is called "ascetic." This refers to actions of self-denial and spiritual training which are central to fasting.

Fasting is a spiritual exercise. It is not imposed or forced upon us. In the same way that true repentance cannot be forced upon anyone, each of us makes the choice to turn away from our sinful ways and go toward our loving, for giving Father in Heaven.

THE PRELENTEN WEEKS

Before The Great Fast begins, five Sunday lessons prepare us for the Fast. On the first Sunday we see Zacchaeus, who shows a great desire to see Christ.

Humility is the theme of the second Sunday, called the *Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee*. The Lord's parable in Luke 18:10-14 teaches that fasting with pride is rejected by God. For this reason, there is no fasting the week following this Sunday. This includes no fasting on Wednesday and Friday that week. (*Fridays are usually fasting days throughout the year—Friday's Fast commemorates the Lord's Crucifixion. In some communities a Wednesday fast is also observed. Wednesday's Fast recalls the betrayal of Christ by Judas.*)

Repentance is the theme of the third Pre-Lenten Sunday, called the *Sunday of the Prodigal Son*. Before we can return to God, we need to recognize that we are far from God because of sin. Like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), we are in a self-imposed exile. Will we come to our senses as did the Prodigal Son and return to our Father?

The next Sunday is called both *Meatfare Sunday* and the *Sunday of the Last Judgment*. The second name refers to the Gospel lesson (*Matthew 25:31-46*) read on this day. The Lord tells us we will be judged at the end according to the love we have shown for our brother. "I was hungry...thirsty...naked...a stranger...in prison...sick... Whatever you did for one of the least of these

brothers of Mine you did for Me." Almsgiving goes hand in hand with fasting. This Sunday is called Meatfare because it is the last day meat, fish or poultry was eaten before Easter, for those keeping The Great Fast.

The last Pre-Lenten Sunday is called both *Cheesefare Sunday* and the *Sunday of Forgiveness*. This is the last day dairy products were eaten before the Fast. The Gospel lesson (*Matthew 6:14-21*) read on this day tells us that our fast must not be hypocritical or "for show." Our work and our appearance are to continue as usual and our extra efforts are to be known only by God. The Gospel reading also reminds us that God the Father will forgive us in the same manner as we forgive our brother. With this promise of forgiveness, Great Lent begins.