

“When You Fast” (Matt. 6:16)

Excerpt from Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Welcome to the Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2015), pp. 271-275.

Those ancient fasting guidelines took shape in a Mediterranean context, so it isn't always clear how to interpret them in today's superstore. It is olive oil that is specifically named as restricted ... [at some parishes] they take that rule at face value and permit other oils, as well as margarine. But at other churches it is interpreted to mean no oils at all, and no food cooked in oil—no potato chips, for instance. However, even if margarine makes the cut in regard to oil, most margarines include dairy products, so there's some close reading of ingredient lists to make sure the margarine in question is truly nondairy. (The same thing goes for chocolate chips: some brands include milk products, some do not.) It turns out that “nondairy” powdered creamer usually includes milk derivatives,

It's an open question how closely an Orthodox Christian should read those ingredient lists. Some feel that “if you can't see it, it isn't there,” and it's foolish, for example, to reject a loaf of bread because one of the ingredients is whey. For goodness' sake, you don't eat it because you have an unbridled craving for whey.

But others say that the added work of scrutinizing labels is part of the spiritual discipline of Lent: It's *supposed* to be irksome; it's supposed to disrupt our comfortable routine. Lent is a good time to break up automatic behaviors and think more closely about what we consume.

This is one of those times when there are “big-T” and “small-t” traditions, where we can differentiate between practices that are universal in the church and those that vary from one nation, or parish; to the next. The specifics of fasting in Orthodoxy have long been determined at the parish level, and the saying “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” had its origin in a question about fasting. When St. Monica (AD 332—387) moved to Milan with her son, Augustine, she was puzzled about the fasting customs. At her previous church they had fasted on Saturday, in commemoration of our Lord's rest in the tomb; but in Milan, she found, they did not observe this fast. So St. Augustine, then a catechumen, asked St. Ambrose, their bishop in Milan, what to do. “When I am here [in Milan] I do not fast on Saturday; but when I am at Rome I do,” he answered: “Whatever church you may come to, conform to its custom, if you would avoid either receiving or giving offense.” St. Augustine calls these different ways of applying a common practice the “variety in the robe of [Christ's] bride.”

So the specifics of what one does or doesn't eat are less important than the discipline of fasting itself, but if we try to make fasting comfortable, we will miss the point. A non-Orthodox friend laughed when she heard me say that fasting practices vary from one parish to the next, and exclaimed that, obviously, people would search for the church with the easiest rule. That makes sense if you think of sin as debt, and want to be sure you're making the smallest acceptable payment. But it doesn't make sense if sin is sickness, that would be like searching for the doctor who gives only sugar pills, or the physical therapist

who requires the least exercise. Fasting is a voluntary discipline, and if you don't do it, you're the one who loses.'

Fasting works pointedly on our craving to "nourish and cherish" (Eph. 5:29) these comfort-loving bodies. And it's a good behavior to focus on, because food-fasting is available to everyone. Other forms of fasting, from entertainment or candy perhaps, might not have significance for one category of people or another, but everybody eats. Gaining control over your desire to eat what you want strengthens your self-control in all areas.

Tertullian, writing early in the third century, refers to this way of fasting as *xerophagy*, "dry eating," since bread and vegetables are cooked and eaten without oil. He likens it to the diet of Daniel and his fellow captives in the Babylonian king's court, who grew stronger when they refused the rich foods from the king's table. Tertullian also points out that we are not rejecting these foods as if they were inherently evil, but only putting them aside temporarily, "abstaining from things which we do not reject, but defer." If steak and ice cream were morally suspect, we wouldn't begin eating them again, on the holiest feast days of the year.

Even with local variations, it helps a great deal that everyone is keeping the same fast at the same time. I've surely found that my self-chosen disciplines have a way of getting softened or discarded when they become difficult. Just knowing that others are wrestling with, the very same temptations, and counting on you to hold up your end, helps you persevere.

There are a few other common suggestions for having a safe and sane fast. Don't pay any attention to how others are fasting, or not fasting; that only produces judgmentalism. On the other hand, if you are not following the fast closely, don't be obvious about it. Fasting is hard, and we need each other's support. But if you find yourself in a situation where your host is serving nonfasting foods, be flexible; it's better to break the fast than make a show of your spiritual superiority. A friend of mine told me that when he was newly Orthodox he invited his priest over for lunch on a fast day, and served cheeseburgers. The pastor ate the burger, then told him, "From now on...."

If you have health needs that make rigorous fasting unwise, you should talk with your spiritual father and work out an alternative plan. (Pregnant and nursing mothers usually don't fast, and children learn to fast gradually as they grow.) There's a principle in Orthodoxy called *oikonomia*, or "economy," a compound of *oikos*, "house," and *nomos*, "law" or "rules"—literally, "house rules." This principle recognizes the need for flexibility, and that sometimes spiritual progress is better served by amending the rules than by exacting conformity. "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mk. 2:27). Wise discernment is needed here because of the temptation to rationalize away whatever you do or don't want to do. That's another reason it's helpful to have a spiritual mother or father, who can help you discern and hold you accountable.

By the way, you might notice people using the terms "Lent" and "Great Lent" interchangeably. Either term can refer to the season of fasting before Pascha, but it is sometimes called "Great" to distinguish it from the three lesser "Lents" of the church year. Dormition Fast (also called Dormition Lent) runs two weeks, from August 1 to the anniversary of the Virgin Mary's repose on August 15. The Nativity Fast (or Nativity Lent) runs six weeks, from November 15 to Christ's Nativity (Christmas) on December 25, and Apostles' Lent runs from the eighth day after Pentecost to the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, June 29; that could range from a couple of days to a few weeks.

Orthodox also fast on Wednesday and Friday of almost every week. This is one of the most ancient Christian spiritual disciplines. The *Didache*, a Christian treatise from about AD 80, reminds its hearers that observant Jews fast on Monday and Thursday (as the Pharisee in Jesus' parable says, "I fast twice a week," Lk. 18:12). But, it continues, we Christians don't do that, instead we "fast on the fourth day [Wednesday] and the Preparation [Friday]." The Wednesday fast is said to be in observance of Judas's betrayal, and the Friday fast for the Crucifixion. Altogether Orthodox are keeping a mostly vegan diet for more than half the days of the year. Fasting guidelines still leave lots of carbohydrates to choose from, so Orthodox who fast are not necessarily skinny.

There are exceptions and variations that complicate things, there are "wine and oil" days, and "fish, wine, and oil" days, when those normally restricted foods are permitted, and there are a few weeks in the year that we don't fast at all. Since the pattern is not predictable, most Orthodox keep a liturgical calendar on their kitchen wall (or their computer or smartphone) to check the day's specifics.