

The Confessor's Tongue for February 25, 2024

Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

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The Meaning of Fasting, Part I

Bishop Kallistos Ware

This excellent article, published as an introduction to the English Triodion, should be read and pondered by all of us in preparation for the fast. It will appear here in installments.

'We waited, and at last our expectations were fulfilled', writes the Serbian Bishop Nikolai of Ochrid, describing the Easter service at Jerusalem. 'When the Patriarch sang "Christ is risen", a heavy burden fell from our souls. We felt as if we also had been raised from the dead. All at once, from all around, the same cry resounded like the noise of many waters. "Christ is risen" sang the Greeks, the Russians, the Arabs, the Serbs, the Copts, the Armenians, the Ethiopians one after another, each in his own tongue, in his own melody. . . . Coming out from the service at dawn, we began to regard everything in the light of the glory of Christ's Resurrection, and all appeared different from what it had yesterday; everything seemed better, more expressive, more glorious. Only in the light of the Resurrection does life receive meaning.'

This sense of resurrection joy, so vividly described by Bishop Nikolai, forms the foundation of all the worship of the Orthodox Church; it is the one and only basis for our Christian life and hope. Yet, in order for us to experience the full power of this Paschal rejoicing, each of us needs to pass through a time of preparation. 'We waited,' says Bishop Nikolai, 'and at last our expectations were fulfilled.' Without this waiting, without this expectant preparation, the deeper meaning of the Easter celebration will be lost.

So it is that before the festival of Easter there has developed a long preparatory season of repentance and fasting, extending in present Orthodox usage over ten weeks. First come twenty-two days (four successive Sundays) of preliminary observance; then the six weeks or forty days of the Great Fast of Lent; and finally Holy Week, Balancing the seven weeks of Lent and Holy Week, there follows after Easter a corresponding season of fifty days of thanksgiving, concluding with Pentecost.

Each of these seasons has its own liturgical book. For the time of preparation there is the *Lenten Triodion* or 'Book of Three Odes', the most important parts of which are here presented in English translation. For the time of thanksgiving there is the *Pentekostarion*, also known in Slav usage as the *Festal Triodion*. The point of division between the two books is midnight on the evening of Holy Saturday, with Matins for Easter Sunday as the first service in the *Pentekostarion*. This division into two distinct volumes, made for reasons of practical convenience, should not cause us to overlook the essential unity between the Lord's Crucifixion and His Resurrection, which together form a single, indivisible action. And just as

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the Crucifixion and the Resurrection are one action, so also the 'three holy days' (*triduum sanctum*) - Great Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday constitute a single liturgical observance. Indeed, the division of the *Lenten Triodion* and the *Pentekostarion* into two books did not become standard until after the eleventh century; in early manuscripts they are both contained in the same codex.

What do we find, then, in this book of preparation that we term the *Lenten Triodion*? It can most briefly be described as *the book of the fast*. Just as the children of Israel ate the 'bread of affliction' (Deut. 16: 3) in preparation for the Passover, so Christians prepare themselves for the celebration of the New Passover by observing a fast. But what is meant by this word 'fast' (*nisteia*)? Here the utmost care is needed, so as to preserve a proper balance between the outward and the inward. On the outward level fasting involves physical abstinence from food and drink, and without such exterior abstinence a full and true fast cannot be kept; yet the rules about eating and drinking must never be treated as an end in themselves, for ascetic fasting has always an inward and unseen purpose. Man is a unity of body and soul, a living creature fashioned from natures visible and invisible', in the words of the *Triodion*; and our ascetic fasting should therefore involve both these natures at once. The tendency to over-emphasize external rules about food in a legalistic way, and the opposite tendency to scorn these rules as outdated and unnecessary, are both alike to be deplored as a betrayal of true Orthodoxy. In both cases the proper balance between the outward and the inward has been impaired.

The second tendency is doubtless the more prevalent in our own day, especially in the West. Until the fourteenth century, most Western Christians, in common with their brethren in the Orthodox East, abstained during Lent not only from meat but from animal products, such as, eggs, milk, butter and cheese. In East and West alike, the Lenten fast involved a severe physical effort. But in Western Christendom over the past five hundred years, the physical requirements of fasting have been steadily reduced, until by now they are little more than symbolic. How many, one wonders, of those who eat pancakes on Shrove Tuesday are aware of the original reason for this custom to use up any remaining eggs and butter before the Lenten fast begins? Exposed as it is to Western secularism, the Orthodox world in our own time is also beginning to follow the same path of laxity.

One reason for this decline in fasting is surely a heretical attitude towards human nature, a false 'spiritualism' which rejects or ignores the body, viewing man solely in terms of his reasoning brain. As a result, many contemporary Christians have lost a

true vision of man as an integral unity of the visible and the invisible; they neglect the positive role played by the body in the spiritual life, forgetting St. Paul's affirmation: 'Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. . . glorify God with your body' (I Cor. 6: 19-20). Another reason for the decline in fasting among Orthodox is the argument, commonly advanced in our times, that the traditional rules are no longer possible today. These rules presuppose, so it is urged, a closely organized, non-pluralistic Christian society, following an agricultural way of life that is now increasingly a thing of the past. There is a measure of truth in this. But it needs also to be said that fasting, as traditionally practiced in the Church, has *always* been difficult and has *always* involved hardship. Many of our contemporaries are willing to fast for reasons of health or beauty, in order to lose weight; cannot we Christians do as much for the sake of the heavenly Kingdom? Why should the self-denial gladly accepted by previous generations of Orthodox prove such an intolerable burden to their successors today? Once St. Seraphim of Sarov was asked why the miracles of grace, so abundantly manifest in the past, were no longer apparent in his own day, and to this he replied: 'Only one thing is lacking - a firm resolve'.

The primary aim of fasting is to make us *conscious of our dependence upon God*. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food - particularly in the opening days - involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do nothing' (John 15: 5). If we always take our fill of food and drink, we easily grow over-confident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The observance of a physical fast undermines this sinful complacency. Stripping from us the specious assurance of the Pharisee - who fasted, it is true, but not in the right spirit - Lenten abstinence gives us the saving self dissatisfaction of the Publican (Luke I 8: 10-13). Such is the function of the hunger and the tiredness: to make us 'poor in spirit', aware of our helplessness and of our dependence on God's aid.

Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element of weariness and hunger. Abstinence leads, not merely to this, but also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. Even if the fast proves debilitating at first, afterwards we find that it enables us to sleep less, to think more clearly, and to work more decisively. As many doctors acknowledge, periodical fasts contribute to bodily hygiene. While involving genuine self-denial, fasting does not seek to do violence to our body but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Most of us in the Western world habitually eat more than we need. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excessive weight and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.

It will be noted that in common Orthodox usage the words 'fasting' and 'abstinence' are employed interchangeably. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church made a clear distinction between the two terms: abstinence concerned the types of food eaten, irrespective of quantity, whereas fasting signified a limitation on the number of meals or on the amount of food that could be taken. Thus on certain days both abstinence and fasting were required; alternatively, the one might be prescribed but not the other. In the Orthodox Church a clear-cut distinction is not made between the two words. During Lent there is frequently a limitation on the number of meals eaten each day, but when a meal is permitted there is no restriction on the amount of food allowed. The Fathers simply state, as a guiding principle, that we should never eat to satiety but always rise from the table feeling that we could have taken more and that we are now ready for prayer.

If it is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting, it is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting is not a mere matter of diet. 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 to our Father's house. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means 'abstinence not only from food but from sins'. 'The fast', he insists, 'should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body': the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice. It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: 'You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother'. The same point is made in the *Triodion*, especially during the first week of Lent:

As we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. . .

Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil, To control the tongue, to forbear from anger, To abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God. Let us keep the Fast not only by refraining from food, But by becoming strangers to all the bodily passions. ⁸

The inner significance of fasting is best summed up in the triad: *prayer, fasting, almsgiving*. Divorced from prayer and from the reception of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. It leads, not to contrition and joyfulness, but to pride, inward tension and irritability. The link between prayer and fasting is rightly indicated by Father Alexander Elchaninov. A critic of fasting says to him: 'Our work suffers and we become irritable. . . I have never seen servants [in pre-revolutionary Russia] so bad tempered as during the last days of Holy Week. Clearly, fasting has a very bad effect on the nerves.' To this Father Alexander replies: 'You are quite right.

... If it is not accompanied by prayer and an increased spiritual life, it merely leads to a heightened state of irritability. It is natural that servants who took their fasting seriously and who were forced to work hard during Lent, while not being allowed to go to church, were angry and irritable.'

Fasting, then, is valueless or even harmful when not combined with prayer. In the Gospels the devil is cast out, not by fasting alone, but by 'prayer and fasting' (Matt. 17: 21 ; Mark 9: 29); and of the early Christians it is said, not simply that they fasted, but that they 'fasted and prayed' (Acts 13: 3; compare 14: 23). In both the Old and the New Testament fasting is seen, not as an end in itself, but as an aid to more intense and living prayer, as a preparation for decisive action or for direct encounter with God. Thus our Lord's forty-day fast in the wilderness was the immediate preparation for His public ministry (Matt. 4: 1-11). When Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34: 28) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (3 [1] Kgs. 19: 8-12), the fast was in both cases linked with a theophany. The same connection between fasting and the vision of God is evident in the case of St. Peter (Acts 10: 9-17). He 'went up on the housetop to pray about the sixth hour, and he became very hungry and wanted to eat; and it was in this state that he fell into a trance and heard the divine voice. Such is always the purpose of ascetic fasting - to enable us, as the *Triodion* puts it, to 'draw near to the mountain of prayer'.

Prayer and fasting should in their turn be accompanied by almsgiving - by love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness. Eight days before the opening of the Lenten fast, on the Sunday of the Last Judgment, the appointed Gospel is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25: 31-46), reminding us that the criterion in the coming judgment will not be the strictness of our fasting but the amount of help that we have given to those in need. In the words of the *Triodion*:

Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let this be our way of life: Let us feed the hungry, let us give the thirsty drink, Let us clothe the naked, let us welcome strangers, Let us visit those in prison and the sick. Then the Judge of all the earth will say even to us: 'Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.'

This stanza, it may be noted in passing, is a typical instance of the 'evangelical' character of the Orthodox service-books. In common with so many other texts in the *Triodion*, it is simply a paraphrase of the words of Holy Scripture.

It is no coincidence that on the very threshold of the Great Fast, at Vespers on the Sunday of Forgiveness, there is a special ceremony of mutual reconciliation: for without love towards others there can be no genuine fast. And this love for others should not be limited to formal gestures or to sentimental feelings, but should issue in specific acts of almsgiving. Such was the firm conviction of the

early Church. The second-century *Shepherd of Hermas* insists that the money saved through fasting is to be given to the widow, the orphan and the poor. But almsgiving means more than this. It is to give not only our money but our time, not only what we have but what we are; it is to give a part of ourselves. When we hear the *Triodion* speak of almsgiving, the word should almost always be taken in this deeper sense. For the mere giving of money can often be a substitute and an evasion, a way of protecting ourselves from closer personal involvement with those in distress. On the other hand, to do nothing more than offer reassuring words of advice to someone crushed by urgent material anxieties is equally an evasion of our responsibilities (see Jas. 2: 16). Bearing in mind the unity already emphasized between man's body and his soul, we seek to offer help on both the material and the spiritual levels at once.

'When thou seest the naked, cover him; and hide not thyself from thine own flesh.' The Eastern liturgical tradition, in common with that of the West, treats Isaiah 58: 3-8 as a basic Lenten text. So we read in the *Triodion*:

While fasting with the body, brethren, let us also fast in spirit. Let us loose every bond of iniquity; Let us undo the knots of every contract made by violence; Let us tear up all unjust agreements; Let us give bread to the hungry And welcome to our house the poor who have no roof to cover them, That we may receive great mercy from Christ our God.

Always in our acts of abstinence we should keep in mind St. Paul's admonition not to condemn others who fast less strictly: 'Let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats' (Rom. 14: 3). Equally, we remember Christ's condemnation of outward display in prayer, fasting or almsgiving (Matt. 6: 1-18). Both these Scriptural passages are often recalled in the *Triodion*:

Consider well, my soul: dost thou fast? Then despise not thy neighbor. Dost thou abstain from food? Condemn not thy brother. Come, let us cleanse ourselves by almsgiving and acts of mercy to the poor, Not sounding a trumpet or making a show of our charity. Let not our left hand know what our right hand is doing; Let not vainglory scatter the fruit of our almsgiving; But in secret let us call on Him that knows all secrets: Father, forgive us our trespasses, for Thou lovest mankind.

To be continued...

On Conquering Our Passions

St. John of Kronstadt

Both the spiritual and bodily powers of a man increase and become perfected and strengthened by their exercise. By exercising your hand in writing, sewing, or knitting, you will accustom it to such work; by frequently exercising yourself in composition, you will learn to write easily and well; by exercising yourself in doing good works or in conquering your passions and temptations, you will in time learn to do good works easily and with delight; and with the help

of God's all-active grace, you will easily learn to conquer your passions. But if you cease writing, sewing, knitting, or if you only do so seldom, you will write, sew and knit badly. If you do not exercise yourself in composition, or do so very seldom, if you live in the material cares of life only, it will probably become difficult for you to connect a few words together, especially upon spiritual subjects: the work set you will seem to you like an Egyptian labor, if you cease praying, or pray seldom; prayer will be oppressive to you. If you do not fight against your passions, or only do so seldom and feebly, you will find it very difficult to fight against them, you will often be conquered by them; they will give you nor rest, and your life will be poisoned by them, if you do not learn how to conquer these evil, inward enemies that settle in your heart. Therefore labor and activity are indispensable for all. Life without activity is not life, but something monstrous—a sort of phantom of life. This is why it is the duty of every man to fight continually and persistently against the slothfulness of the flesh. God preserve every Christian from indulging it! "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affects and lusts." "Unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he hath." *My Life in Christ*, pp. 116-7

The Sacrifice of Praise

"Not for thy sacrifices will I reprove thee: for thy whole—burnt offerings are before me continually....Shall I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Sacrifice to God the sacrifice of praise; and render thy supplications to the Most High. And call upon me in the day of tribulation; and I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me....the sacrifice of praise shall glorify Me..." Psalm 49

Under the law of Moses, God's chosen people the Hebrews offered sacrifices of animals—blood, fat, flesh—as well as wheat, wine, and oil. The worship of God required bringing the correct sacrifices at the right times.

The sacrificial system was, however, but a type, a shadow, a foreshadowing of something deeper which was to come fully only with Christ. It provided training and preparation for true worship in spirit and in truth. This is indicated more than once in the Old Testament. The Psalm itself declares that rather than the flesh of bulls and blood of goats of which God has no need, God desires the sacrifice of praise and the offering of supplications.

We Christians have been freed from the Law's prescribed sacrifices of animals, yet we are not free from bringing sacrifices and offerings to God. Our corporate worship, our coming together as the Church, is the primary time and place for making these sacrifices and offerings. In our worship, we hear the great deeds of God recounted to us, those done by Christ and those done through His saints, in whom God is wondrous. We recall all the benefits He offers us, and we reflect on who He is.

Our response is our worship, which involves offering the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. Praise involves acknowledging God's attributes and honoring him for who He is and what He has done. Thanksgiving is our acknowledgment of His mercy towards us, an expression of our appreciation for the benefits He confers upon us. The word 'eucharist', in fact, comes from the Greek verb 'to give thanks.'

Moreover, we offer supplications to God in our worship, for ourselves, for others, for the Church, and for the world. Lifting our requests to God honors Him, for it implicitly declares that we believe He can and will do something about our requests. Not to offer supplications is to say that we do not think God can or will do anything in response.

As we better come to know God and more deeply realize what He has done and continues to do for us, we come to see the sheer folly and ingratitude in not regularly offering the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. He has given us life in this world. Through Baptism He has made us members of Christ's body and adopted us as His children and given us the inestimable privilege of naming Him "our Father." How can we neglect making the regular sacrifice of praise to Him in response? How can we begrudge a few hours out of the 168 in our week to acknowledge our Creator?

Attending the Vigil and the Liturgy and attentively participating is to make these offerings of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication to the Lord. We cannot neglect this duty and expect to experience the fullness of life in Christ.

Yet there is one thing more God desires of us beyond the offering of our lips. Most of all, He desires us, that we offer ourselves to him each week as we present ourselves to Him and stand before Him at the Divine Liturgy. He looks for us to surrender ourselves to Him, to offer ourselves to Him as living sacrifices. This has been His goal all along, to bring man back into full relationship with Him.

Our worship in the Church thus involves more than coming and being present at services. It calls us to attend, to be engaged, and to respond to God by offering to Him from our heart our praise, our thanks, our supplications, and, ultimately, ourselves. We must make this offering of ourselves again and again, because, after making it, we often pull ourselves back in fear or worry. We forget who we are in Christ and go back to serving created things rather than the Creator. Our worship reminds us who we are and calls us back to God, so that by the end of our lives we may truly have offered ourselves wholly to God as living sacrifices. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Upcoming Events 2023

1 March: Parish Dinner/Dance Fundraiser, 6:30
17 March: Forgiveness Vespers, 5:00 p.m.
18-23 March: Clean Week
6 May: Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!