

The Confessor's Tongue for March 3, 2024

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

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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With Whom To Share Your Faults?

St. John of Kronstadt

It may happen that there is much wickedness in your soul. But let it be known to God alone, who knows everything that is secret and concealed, and do not show all your uncleanness to others; do not corrupt them by the breath of the wickedness concealed within you. Tell God your grief, that your soul is full of wickedness, and that your life is near to hell, but to other people show a bright and pleasant countenance. What have they to do with your madness? Or declare your soul's sickness to your confessor or to a true friend, so that they may teach you, guide you, and restrain you. *My Life in Christ*, p. 48.

The Meaning of Fasting, Part 2

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.

If we are to understand correctly the text of the *Triodion* and the spirituality that underlies it, there are **five misconceptions** about the Lenten fast against which we should guard. In the **first** place, the Lenten fast is not intended only for monks and nuns, but is *enjoined on the whole Christian people*. Nowhere do the Canons of the Ecumenical or Local Councils suggest that fasting is only for monks and not for the laity. By virtue of their Baptism, all Christians - whether married or under monastic vows - are Cross-bearers, following the same spiritual path. The exterior conditions in which they live out their Christianity display a wide variety, but in its inward essence the life is one. Just as the monk by his voluntary self-denial is seeking to affirm the intrinsic goodness and beauty of God's creation, so also is each married Christian required to be in some measure an ascetic. The way of negation and the way of affirmation are interdependent, and every Christian is called to follow both ways at once.

In the **second** place, the *Triodion* *should not be misconstrued in a Pelagian sense*. If the Lenten texts are continually urging us to greater personal efforts, this should not be taken as implying that our progress depends solely upon the exertion of our own will. On the contrary, whatever we achieve in the Lenten fast is to be regarded as a free gift of grace from God. The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete leaves no doubt at all on this point:

I have no tears, no repentance, no compunction; But as God do Thou Thyself, O Savior, bestow them on me.

In the **third** place, our fasting *should not be self-willed but obedient*. When we fast, we should not try to invent special rules for ourselves, but we should follow as faithfully as possible the accepted pattern set before us by Holy Tradition. This accepted pattern, expressing as it does the collective conscience of the People of God, possesses a hidden wisdom and

balance not to be found in ingenious austerities devised by our own fantasy. Where it seems that the traditional regulations are not applicable to our personal situation, we should seek the counsel of our spiritual father - not in order legalistically to secure a 'dispensation' from him, but in order humbly with his help to discover what is the will of God for us. Above all, if we desire for ourselves not some relaxation but some piece of additional strictness, we should not embark upon it without our spiritual father's blessing. Such has been the practice since the early centuries of the Church's life:

Abba Antony said: 'I know of monks who fell after much labor and lapsed into madness, because they trusted in their own work and neglected the commandment that says: "Ask your father, and he will tell you."' (Deut. 32: 7)

Again he said: 'So far as possible, for every step that a monk takes, for every drop of water that he drinks in his cell, he should consult the elders, in case he makes some mistake in this.'

These words apply not only to monks but also to lay people living in the 'world', even though the latter may be bound by a less strict obedience to their spiritual father. If proud and willful, our fasting assumes a diabolical character, bringing us closer not to God but to Satan. Because fasting renders us sensitive to the realities of the spiritual world, it can be dangerously ambivalent: for there are evil spirits as well as good.

In the **fourth** place, paradoxical though it may seem, the period of Lent is a time *not of gloom but of joyfulness*. It is true that fasting brings us to repentance and to grief for sin, but this penitent grief, in the vivid phrase of St. John Climacus, is a 'joy-creating sorrow'. The *Triodion* deliberately mentions both tears and gladness in a single sentence:

Grant me tears falling as the rain from heaven, O Christ, As I keep this joyful day of the Fast.

It is remarkable how frequently the themes of joy and light recur in the texts for the first day of Lent:

With joy let us enter upon the beginning of the Fast. Let us not be of sad countenance. . . . Let us joyfully begin the all-hallowed season of abstinence; And let us shine with the bright radiance of the holy commandments. . . All mortal life is but one day, so it is said, To those who labor with love. There are forty days in the Fast; Let us keep them all with joy.

The season of Lent, it should be noted, falls not in midwinter when the countryside is frozen and dead, but in spring when all things are returning to life. The English word 'Lent' originally had the meaning 'springtime'; and in a text of fundamental importance the *Triodion* likewise describes the Great Fast as 'springtime':

The springtime of the Fast has dawned, The flower of repentance has begun to open. O brethren, let us cleanse ourselves from all impurity And sing to the Giver of Light: Glory be to Thee, who alone lovest mankind.

Lent signifies not winter but spring, not darkness but light, not death but renewed vitality. Certainly it has its somber aspect, with the repeated prostrations at the weekday services, with the dark vestments of the priest, with the hymns sung to a subdued chant, full of compunction. In the Christian Empire of Byzantium theatres were closed and public spectacles forbidden during Lent; and even today weddings are forbidden in the seven weeks of the fast. Yet these elements of austerity should not blind us to the fact that the fast is not a burden, not a punishment, but a gift of God's grace:

Come, O ye people, and today let us accept The grace of the Fast as a gift from God.

Fifthly and finally, our Lenten abstinence *does not imply a rejection of God's creation*. As St. Paul insists, 'Nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom. 14:14). All that God has made is 'very good' (Gen. 1:31): to fast is not to deny this intrinsic goodness but to reaffirm it. 'To the pure all things are pure' (Titus 1:15), and so at the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom of heaven there will be no need for fasting and ascetic self-denial. But, living as we do in a fallen world, and suffering as we do from the consequences of sin, both original and personal, we are not pure; and so we have need of fasting. Evil resides not in created things as such but in our attitude towards them, that is, in our will. The purpose of fasting, then, is not to repudiate the divine creation but to cleanse our will. During the fast we deny our bodily impulses - for example, our spontaneous appetite for food and drink - not because these impulses are in themselves evil, but because they have been disordered by sin and require to be purified through self-discipline. In this way, asceticism is a fight not against but for the body; the aim of fasting is to purge the body from alien defilement and to render it spiritual. By rejecting what is sinful in our will, we do not destroy the God-created body but restore it to its true balance and freedom. In Father Sergei Bulgakov's phrase, we kill the flesh in order to acquire a body.

But in rendering the body spiritual, we do not thereby dematerialize it, depriving it of its character as a physical entity. The 'spiritual' is not to be equated with the non-material, neither is the 'fleshly' or carnal to be equated with the bodily. In St. Paul's usage, 'flesh' denotes the totality of man, soul and body together, in so far as he is fallen and separated from God; and in the same way 'spirit' denotes the totality of man, soul and body together, in so far as he is redeemed and divinized by grace. Thus the soul as well as the body can become carnal and fleshly, and the body as well as the soul can become spiritual. When St. Paul enumerates the 'works of the flesh' (Gal. 5: 19-21), he includes such things as sedition, heresy and envy, which involve the soul much more

than the body. In making our body spiritual, then, the Lenten fast does not suppress the physical aspect of our human nature, but makes our materiality once more as God intended it to be.

Such is the way in which we interpret our abstinence from food. Bread and wine and the other fruits of the earth are gifts from God, of which we partake with reverence and thanksgiving. If Orthodox Christians abstain from eating meat at certain times, or in some cases continually, this does not mean that the Orthodox Church is on principle vegetarian and considers meat-eating to be a sin; and if we abstain sometimes from wine, this does not mean that we uphold teetotalism. When we fast, this is not because we regard the act of eating as shameful, but in order to make our eating spiritual, sacramental and eucharistic - no longer a concession to greed but a means of communion with God the giver. So far from making us look on food as a defilement, fasting has exactly the opposite effect. Only those who have learnt to control their appetites through abstinence can appreciate the full glory and beauty of what God has given to us. To one who has eaten nothing for twenty-four hours, an olive can seem full of nourishment. A slice of plain cheese or a hard boiled egg never taste so good as on Easter morning, after seven weeks of fasting.

We can apply this approach also to the question of abstinence from sexual relations. It has long been the Church's teaching that during seasons of fasting married couples should try to live as brother and sister, but this does not at all signify that sexual relations within marriage are in themselves sinful. On the contrary, the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete -- in which, more than anywhere else in the *Triodion*, we find summed up the significance of Lent -- states without the least ambiguity: Marriage is honorable, and the marriage-bed undefiled. For on both Christ has given His blessing, Eating in the flesh at the wedding in Cana, Turning water into wine and revealing His first miracle.

The abstinence of married couples, then, has as its aim not the suppression but the purification of sexuality. Such abstinence, practiced 'with mutual consent for a time', has always the positive aim, 'that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer' (1 Cor. 7: 5). Self restraint, so far from indicating a dualist depreciation of the body, serves on the contrary to confer upon the sexual side of marriage a spiritual dimension which might otherwise be absent.

To guard against a dualist misinterpretation of the fast, the *Triodion* speaks repeatedly about the inherent goodness of the material creation. In the last of the services that it contains, Vespers for Holy Saturday, the sequence of fifteen Old Testament Lessons opens with the first words of Genesis, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth... : all created things are God's handiwork and as such are 'very good'. Every part of this divine creation, so the *Triodion* insists, joins in giving praise to the Maker:

The hosts of heaven give Him glory; Before Him tremble cherubim and seraphim; Let everything that has breath and all creation Praise Him, bless Him, and exalt Him above all for ever. O Thou who coverest Thy high places with the waters, Who settest the sand as a bound to the sea and upholdest all things: The sun sings Thy praises, the moon gives Thee glory, Every creature offers a hymn to Thee, His Author and Creator, for ever.

Let all the trees of the forest dance and sing. . . .
Let the mountains and all the hills Break forth into great rejoicing at the mercy of God, And let the trees of the forest clap their hands.

This affirmative attitude towards the material world is founded not only on the doctrine of creation but also on the doctrine of Christ. Again and again in the *Triodion*, the true physical reality of Christ's human nature is underlined. How, then, can the human body be evil, if God Himself has in His own person assumed and divinized the body? As we state at Matins on the first Sunday in Lent, the Sunday of Orthodoxy:

Thou hast not appeared to us, O loving Lord, merely in outward semblance, As say the followers of Mani, who are enemies of God, But in the full and true reality of the flesh.

Because Christ took a true material body, so the hymns for the Sunday of Orthodoxy make clear, it is possible and, indeed, essential to depict His person in the holy icons, using material wood and paint:

The uncircumscribed Word of the Father became circumscribed, Taking flesh from thee, O Theotokos, And He has restored the sullied image to its ancient glory, Pilling it with the divine beauty. This our salvation we confess in deed and word, And we depict it in the holy icons.

This assertion of the spirit-bearing potentialities of the material creation is a constant theme during the season of Lent. On the first Sunday of the Great Fast, we are reminded of the physical nature of Christ's Incarnation, of the material reality of the holy icons, and of the visible, aesthetic beauty of the Church. On the second Sunday we keep the memory of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), who taught that all creation is permeated by the energies of God, and that even in the present life this divine glory can be perceived through man's physical eyes, provided that his body has been rendered spiritual by God's grace. On the third Sunday we venerate the material wood of the Cross; on the sixth Sunday we bless material branches of palms; on Wednesday in Holy Week we are signed with material oil in the sacrament of Anointing; on Holy Thursday we recall how at the Last Supper Christ blessed material bread and wine, transforming them into His Body and Blood.

Those who fast, so far from repudiating material things, are on the contrary assisting in their redemption. They are fulfilling the vocation assigned to the 'sons of God' by St. Paul: 'The created universe waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . The creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now' (Rom. 8 : 19-22). By means of our Lenten abstinence, we seek with God's help to exercise this calling as priests of the creation, restoring all things to their primal splendor. Ascetic self-discipline, then, signifies a rejection of the world, only in so far as it is corrupted by the fall; of the body, only in so far as it is dominated by sinful passions. Lust excludes love: so long as we lust after other persons or other things, we cannot truly love them. By

delivering us from lust, the fast renders us capable of genuine love. No longer ruled by the selfish desire to grasp and to exploit, we begin to see the world with the eyes of Adam in Paradise. Our self-denial is the path that leads to our self-affirmation; it is our means of entry into the cosmic liturgy whereby all things visible and invisible ascribe glory to their Creator.

The Mathematics of Lenten Meals

Fr. Justin Frederick

Let us take a different approach to Lent and do some math related to food in the Fast. You might think that mathematics has nothing to do with Lent—but it does.

How much do people eat? The popular norm for eating is the proverbial three meals a day. Some like their meals square. Others may prefer other shapes to their meals, but, having been too shy to express their preferences, the shapes of their meals have not made it into the general lexicon as square meals have. But today it is not for us to examine the geometry of food, only the simple arithmetic of it.

Three meals a day (square or round) translate into twenty-one meals a week for the average person following the expected practice. Even in this, we Orthodox, of course, are already out of step with society: as we do not eat breakfast on the Lord's Day, we typically get no more than 20 meals a week.

With 20 meals a week as our baseline for time outside of Lent, let us do the Lenten meal math. During the fast, not only does the substance of what we eat change, as we well know, so does the quantity of meals—if we follow the Church's norm for fasting fully. The purpose of this is manifold. First, it helps us subject the body to the soul. Second, it strengthens our prayer by keeping us from a heavy stomach and sleepy eyes so we may pray with more attention and feeling. Third, it helps us cut off our self-will and attacks our indulgent self-love. Fourth, by reducing consumption of food, it provides every person who fasts the means to give alms. If I usually spend \$10 a day for food to eat, and by fasting, only spend \$7, the \$3 I have saved is available to give as alms. Anyone who eats regularly, regardless of income, is hereby enabled to give alms.

This last reason for fasting provides us the inspiration for our exercise in Lenten meal math. Let us calculate. During the normal Lenten week (weeks two through six), one meal a day is prescribed Monday through Friday after Vespers in the late afternoon or early evening, and two meals a day on the weekend, one at midday, the other in the evening. So, the standard twenty-meal week has been cut 55% to a nine-meal week.

Clean Week, the first week of the fast, requires still more subtraction. Two meals on each day of the weekend but only one meal on Wednesday and one on Friday. The twenty-meal week has been cut by 70% to just six meals.

Holy Week, if we calculate from Palm Sunday through Holy Saturday offers us two meals on Sunday, one each day Monday through Thursday, none on Friday, and, though there isn't really a meal for Saturday but just a little bread and wine given at church to sustain the faithful through the upcoming Vigil people usually have one after the Vespers Liturgy. That gives another six-meal week, though some try to get by with fewer.

The fast lasts seven weeks. If it is true that the typical American Orthodox Christian eats twenty square meals a week (why does geometry keep trying to intrude into our arithmetic?) would have consumed 140 meals over the

seven weeks. But with two six-meal weeks and five nine-meal weeks, the Orthodox Christian following the Church's norm eats 57 meals in that time—83 fewer than usual. That is 41% of usual consumption, or, to reverse it, a 59% reduction in eating.

The Church has always troubled herself with caring for the poor by providing food, drink, clothing, and other necessities for those in need. Many people outside the church in our country evince concern for the poor as well—and typically look to government to provide for them.

Consider: if motivated by love for God and the desire to give alms more abundantly, Orthodox Christians fasted in this way, how greatly their ability to give to those in need would be augmented. Consider your own weekly food budget (everything—eating out and at home). How much do you spend each week? What if by fasting you reduced your consumption by half and could give that half as alms. How much would that be? Multiply that figure by seven, and you will see how much fasting enables the giving of alms.

Let us say a single man spends \$100 a week on food. Fasting strictly, he is able to get by on \$41 a week. Over the course of the seven weeks, he would have saved \$413 by consuming less which he would then be able to give to help the less fortunate. Suppose our man is not yet able to fast to that degree and is only able to reduce his intake of food by only 40% rather than the full 59%. He still would be able to give \$280 in alms over the course of the fast. Even if in his weakness he makes only a 25% reduction in his consumption of food. Even then, he would be able to give \$175.

Our Lenten math has granted us a glimpse of the power of the Church's Fast to enable the giving of alms. Granted, most people today do not fast to the degree that they eat only fifty-seven modest meals during Lent. The Church has always held that the Fast should be relaxed for the elderly and anyone with ill health, and today that is effectively extended to young children, pregnant women, nursing mother, and others. Today, many in good health make little effort to reduce their consumption of food, even if they do change what they eat. But if, in our contemporary weakness, we do not think ourselves capable of cutting the number of meals during the fast by 59%, what if, motivated by love for Christ and others and the desire to give alms we cut back even a modest 20% so that we could give a that percentage of our weekly food budget as alms for seven weeks? It would make a significant difference for others and for ourselves as well. As you see, math matters in Lent!

The Eight Deadly Vices from St. John Cassian *Summary of Conference 5*

1. Gluttony. There are three kinds of gluttony: eating before the scheduled hour, eating to excessive fullness, and being a picky eater, desiring 'refined and delicate foods.
2. Fornication. There are three kinds of fornication: sexual relations with another person not one's spouse, self-abuse or masturbation ('impurity' in Scripture), and indulgence in lustful looks, thoughts, and fantasies.
3. Avarice, or Love of Money. There are three kinds of Avarice: the first hinders us from giving away wealth and property, the second persuades us to take back what we have given away, and the third 'demands that we long for and acquire what in fact we did not possess before.'
4. Anger. There are three kinds of anger: an internal blazing up called *thumos* in Greek, a breaking out in word

and deed called *orge* in Greek, and a long-simmering resentment called *menis*.

5. Sadness. There are two kinds of sadness. "The first is begotten once anger has ceased, or from some hurt that has been suffered or from a desire that has been thwarted and brought to naught. This can include a sadness, or envy, that others have what one does not possess oneself. The other comes from an unreasonable mental anguish or despair.

6. Accidia (Acedia). There are two kinds of acedia: one puts us to sleep (sloth), so we don't work; the other causes us to give up our work.

7. Vainglory (Boastfulness). There are two basic kinds of vainglory: feeling lifted up and wanting to be noticed because of externals (possessions, appearance, ability), and desiring the empty praise of others for our spiritual and hidden virtues and deeds. Sometimes, however, vainglory has the benefit of restraining us from the destructive sins of fornication.

8. Pride. There are two kinds of pride: the first is bodily (carnal), thinking ourselves superior to others over physical things and our own appearance and ability. The second is spiritual and more dangerous, for it attacks those who have made progress in the virtues, leading them to look down on those who have not made their progress and to judge them.

All other sins, and their number is legion, arise out of these basic eight.

In comparison, the "Seven Deadly Sins" in the West, dating to St. Pope Gregory the Great in 590, differ just a bit.

1. Lust
2. Gluttony
3. Avarice (Greed)
4. Acedia (Sloth)
5. Anger
6. Envy
7. Pride

Sins of concupiscence (the soul's power to desire), or appetite, include, Gluttony, Fornication, and Avarice; sins of irascibility (another power of the soul properly directed against evil) include Anger; while sins of the intellect, or *nous*, include Pride, Vainglory, Acedia, and Sadness.

Some of these vices are natural, in the sense that they are tied to natural functions of the body. Others are unnatural, in that they have no necessary place in us. Natural vices include gluttony and fornication. The others are unnatural. Some such as gluttony and fornication require bodily action to be accomplished; others reside in the soul or mind alone without the body, such as pride and vainglory. Some, such as avarice and anger, are motivated from without; others, such as acedia and sorrow, are motivated from within.

Carnal passions, connected to the body, require a two-fold remedy involving both soul and body. Those passions which are spiritual, "those that, having arisen at the prompting of the soul alone, not only give no pleasure to the flesh but even inflict it with serious sufferings and merely provide the sick soul with the food of a miserable enjoyment", admit "the medicine of a simple heart" to cure them.

Upcoming Events 2023

- 17 March: Forgiveness Vespers, 5:00 p.m.
- 18-23 March: Clean Week
- 6 May: Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!