

Fasting for Great Lent

I get my fair share of questions each year about the precise nature of the prescribed fasting for Great Lent – especially from new members to the Church, catechumens, inquirers, etc. I also assume that there is a certain amount of confusion over this, because we pick things up from other church traditions that did not quite fit into our own Orthodox Tradition. With Great Lent beginning next Monday, I wanted to pass on the fasting guidelines of the Church. I found a very clear article about this entitled, "Our Fasting During Great Lent," by Fr. John Hopko. It is attached to a book published by SVS Press - *When You Fast - Recipes for Lenten Seasons*. Fr. John's article is to the point, and it also has some sound pastoral considerations added, so I will simply pass on the relevant paragraph or two for your reading and reference:

We should begin by reminding ourselves of the basics of the Church's traditional discipline of fasting. During Great Lent, the strictest levels of fasting are prescribed, with certain exceptions allowed for weekends and feast days. The traditional norm, as developed and followed over many centuries in the Orthodox Church, is that we would abstain from the following items (listed here in order, beginning with those items that are eliminated first and then on down to those items that may be permissible at some times):

- meat and meat products (must be restricted)
- milk and egg products (often referred to as "dairy." These items are perhaps permissible for some, for example, young children)
- fish (permissible on certain feasts during Great Lent)
- olive oil (permissible on weekends and certain feasts during Great Lent)
- wine (this means all alcoholic beverages; they are permissible on weekends, and certain feast days during Great Lent)

So then, generally speaking, during Great Lent we are to make do with the following types of food:

- shellfish (shrimp, clams, etc.)
- vegetables
- vegetable products
- legumes
- fruit, grains (breads, pasta, rice, etc.), nuts, etc.
- nonalcoholic, dairy-free beverages

Having laid out the traditional guidelines for fasting, certain points must be made in reference to them. First of all, each of us must make an honest, prayerful assessment of how well we can maintain the fasting discipline. If we are unable - due to age, illness, or some other weakness - to follow the traditional order of fasting completely, we must then make a decision about what we are going to do. Being overly scrupulous in this regard will not save us but neither will any rationalizing away of the need to fast. Each and every person, usually together with the other members of his or her family and, if necessary in consultation with his or her parish priest, needs to make an honest and prayerful decision about how he or she is going to keep the fast. (pp. 247-248).

A clear and pastorally-balanced approach in my estimation. The book from which this article is taken, by the way, is filled with hundreds of lenten recipes, from "main dishes" to "cookies and desserts." Again, it is available from SVS Press.

As to the fasting, there is no doubt that it is both a disciplined and a healthier way of eating and drinking. Each and every family needs to work out its own "domestic strategy" striving for the "royal road" between the extremes of legalism and laxity. Fasting is only effective when linked to prayer and almsgiving. (MATT. 6)

As Fr. John noted, it is sound advice to speak with your parish priest about these issues and how they may be integrated into family life. Please contact me if you so desire.