

# Fasting and Great Lent

The Feast Day of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most important feast day of the year for Orthodox Christians. This day is also referred to by other names: Holy Pascha which means “Passover”, and “Easter” which is commonly heard in North America. The Orthodox Church will celebrate Pascha on May 1 this year. Before meeting this feast day, the Church has prescribed a period for the preparation of our mind, body and soul called the Triodion season. The central part of this season is Great Lent, the 40-day season of spiritual preparation preceding Pascha.

## *The Triodion*

The Triodion begins 10 weeks before Pascha. It consists of three main parts: three Pre-Lenten weeks of preparing our hearts, the six weeks of Lent, and Holy Week. The main theme of the Triodion is repentance, which means 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. Are we willing to turn to Him? During Great Lent, the Church teaches us how to receive Him by using the two great means of repentance – prayer and fasting.



**“Repentance is the gateway to life, freedom and God. Knowing how to repent comes through experience and good counsel.”**

## *The Pre-Lenten Weeks*

Before Great Lent begins, four Sunday lessons prepare us for the Fast, stressing important themes to carry into Lent. The first Sunday, called the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, emphasizes the theme of humility. The Lord’s parable in the Gospel of Luke 18:10-14 teaches that fasting with pride is rejected by God. For this reason, there is no fasting during the week following this Sunday, including on the Wednesday and Friday of that week. Usually, Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days throughout the year in remembrance of Judas’s betrayal of Christ on Wednesday, and Jesus’s crucifixion on Friday.

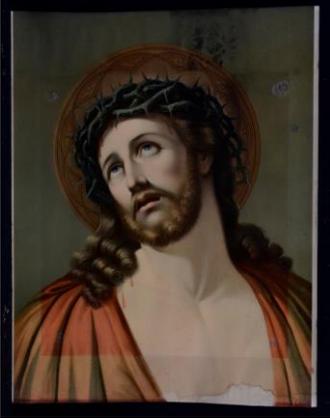
The second Pre-Lenten Sunday, called the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, carries the theme of repentance. Before we can return to God, we need to recognize that sin has distanced us from God. Like the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), we are in a self-imposed exile. As did the Prodigal Son, will we come to our senses and return to our Father?

The next Sunday has two names – Meat-fare Sunday and the Sunday of the Last Judgment. The second name refers to the day’s Gospel lesson from St. Matthew 25:31-46. The Lord tells us that we will be judged at the end according to the love which we have shown for our brother. “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 Meat-fare because it is the last day before the Lenten Fast begins that meat, fish or poultry is eaten before Pascha.

The last Pre-Lenten Sunday also is known by two names: Cheese-fare Sunday and the Sunday of Forgiveness. This is the last day dairy products are eaten before the Fast. This day’s Gospel lesson from Matthew 6:14-21 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 on the next day.

## ***The Lenten Fast***

Great Lent begins on March 14 this year and starts with Clean Monday. Clean Monday is a day of complete fasting, abstaining from food and beverage, except for some water. It should be noted that fasting rules are amended for some such as the ill, children and the elderly. The word “fast” means not eating all or certain foods. The difference between a fast and a diet is that fasting is accompanied by a set of spiritual practices such as prayer and good works. As Orthodox Faithful, we fast completely at certain times of great importance, and especially before receiving Holy Communion. Usually, fasting has in mind limiting the number of meals and the types of foods consumed.



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 (Gen 3:1-19). We fast from food, or a food item, as a reminder that we are to abstain from sinning and doing evil.

Fasting brings us a wealth of benefits. Fasting helps us pray more easily. Our spirit is lighter when we are not weighed down by too much food or rich food. 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 abstaining from foods. St. 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. Do our words please to God? Do we curse God or others? 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 Lenten Fast is called “ascetic,” referring to actions of self-denial and spiritual training which are central to fasting. Fasting is a spiritual exercise. It teaches us spiritual discipline. 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, forgiving Father.

### ***General Fasting Rules***

The Lenten Fast rules observed today were established within the monasteries of the Orthodox Church during the 6th to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. These rules are intended for all Orthodox Christians, not just monks and nuns. The first week of Great Lent is especially strict. A total fast is kept on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. In practice, very few people are able to do this. Some find it necessary to eat a little each day after sunset.

From the second through the sixth weeks of Lent, the general fasting rules are practiced: Meat, animal products, such as dairy and eggs, fish, olive oil and wine and alcohol are not consumed during the weekdays. While no restrictions are prescribed on the amount of food consumed, moderation is always encouraged. Fish, oil and wine are allowed on some of the feast days that take place during the fasting period, such as the Feast of the Annunciation, Finding of the Head of Saint John the Baptist, Palm Sunday and others.

### ***Holy Week***

The week before the Resurrection is referred to as Holy Week. It is a special time of fasting separate from Great Lent. Like the first week, a strict fast is kept during these seven days. Some Orthodox Christians try to keep a total fast on Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday and Holy Wednesday. Most eat a simple Lenten meal at the end of each day before going to the evening Church services. On Holy Thursday, wine is allowed in remembrance of the Last Supper. Holy Friday is kept as a strict fast day, as is Holy Saturday. Holy Saturday is the only Saturday in the entire year when oil is not permitted.

Not everyone will be able to follow these Lenten fasting rules. For example, children and those with conditions such as diabetes. The Church Fathers recommend that newcomers to fasting begin by resolving to faithfully do as much as they are able during the Lenten period. Each year as one matures as a Christian, fuller participation can be undertaken. Moreover, fasting involves our whole being. It is not just about abstaining from foods, but requires prayer. It is important to remember that fasting is not a law, but a voluntary way of remembering not to sin and do evil, and to help keep our focus on prayer, repentance and doing acts of kindness, for we “are not under the law but under grace” (Rom 6:14).

### ***Praying During Lent***

Just as physical exercise is beneficial for our bodies, prayer is essential for our “spiritual health”. The Prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian (see sidebar) is traditionally said many times throughout each day during Great Lent, in addition to our daily prayers. Other key prayers for Lent include Psalm 50 (51) that is a central prayer of repentance. There is also a special prayer to say before the start of Great Lent to give us strength on the Lenten journey.

### ***Easter, Bright Week and the Paschal Season***

The Lenten Fast is broken following the midnight Paschal service. With the proclamation, “Christ is risen!” the time of feasting begins. The week after Pascha is called Bright Week and there is no fasting. For the next 40 days, the Church celebrates the Paschal season. Joy and thanksgiving are the fulfillment of our Lenten journey.

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