

Guidelines to Fasting in the Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church has preserved and maintained a specific, rigorous schedule for implementing the very healthy and spiritually profitable discipline of fasting which must always be combined with prayer and almsgiving. Why do the Orthodox fast? What is its purpose? These questions are vital since answers to them not only explain the fasting rules, but also make fasting easier to put into practice.

The most important aspect of fasting is the promotion of self-control; something vitally necessary – and widely lacking – in present-day materialistic society.

We are bombarded with advertising and other messages which encourage us to indulge ourselves in one sort of excess or another. Yet, our preoccupation with all the luxuries, comforts, and other material things hampers our ability to cultivate a pious and fruitful spiritual life.

We train ourselves in self-control through fasting – we build up our spiritual stamina – and learn through declining a simple food item (like a hamburger, or even a piece of cheese) to avoid behavior and activities which are less than beneficial or even sinful.

The Orthodox also fast to recall the state of man as he was created in the Garden of Eden. We are, after all, a people seeking to return to that blessed life that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the company of God before their sin and subsequent fall.

In the Garden of Eden, God gave man “every herb-bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed” (*Genesis 1:29*). In fact, God also gave “green herb” to “every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creeps upon the earth” (*Genesis 1:30*). In other words, according to Scripture, Adam and Eve consumed no animal products of any kind, and they certainly did not kill any animals for meat.

Orthodox fasting restricts the kind of food we eat, moreso than the amount of food, in an attempt to return to the food given to man by God in the Garden of Eden. Fasting promotes bodily health; this should be logical since when the Orthodox fast they are eating the foods prescribed by God for Adam and Eve!

The fathers of the Church have often pointed out that consuming meat excites the passions and is unhealthy. Even modern medical science tells us that the cholesterol present in animal products leads to arteriosclerosis, hypertension, and other heart disorders. In addition, by limiting our intake of animal products, we allow our body to expel toxins which accumulate in our bodies.

How curious that the foods given by God at the creation of man, the foods eaten by the Orthodox during fast periods, are the original “health foods!”

There are certain days during Great Lent and Holy Week when the Orthodox do not eat any food, but the usual pattern is simply to abstain (avoid) animal products, fish, wine, and oil. Thus fasting in the Orthodox Church can be a positive experience in which we need not feel punished or deprived.

The Orthodox do not fast to punish themselves; this is a negative approach fostered within Western Christianity. There is no amount of punishment or suffering that we can endure to remit our sins; this was done once, for all, by Jesus Christ on the Cross.