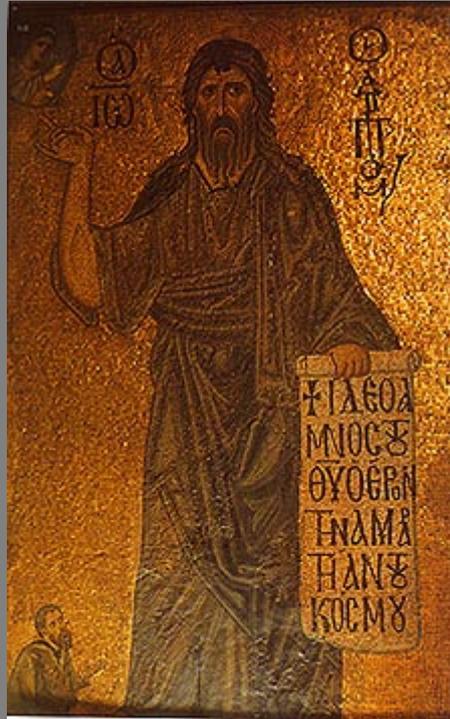


Fasting in the Holy Orthodox Church



St. John the Baptist

Consider well, my soul: do you fast? Despise not your neighbor. Do you abstain from food? Condemn not your brother... May Christ lead you without stumbling into His Kingdom.

We believe that the period before Pascha (Easter) and the Nativity (Christmas) are not times for celebration, as the western churches believe. The Orthodox Church, from the beginning of Christianity (read Eusebius, from the time of St. Constantine the Great, who quotes writers who knew personally the Apostles) has always seen these times as times of prayer, penitence, and fasting. We wait until the Birth of Christ and his Resurrection until we celebrate. Only then do we feast. In fact, for a week after these events, fasting is prohibited. We must, however, prepare ourselves for His Birth and Resurrection when they occur. Being all sinners, we cannot do this without penance, and that includes fasting.

Notes on Fasting

Fasting from foods is intended as spiritual preparation for an experience of deeper communion with God. Each person is a unity of body and soul. A right spiritual diet and a discipline of fasting go together and strengthen

each other. Just as prayer benefits not only the soul but also the body so also fasting from foods benefits not only the body but also the soul. Fasting and prayer make us more sensitive to God's personal presence. At important times of their lives the Prophets fasted and prayed. So did Jesus, the Apostles, Saints and Church Fathers.

Fasting must be undertaken willingly and not by compulsion. God doesn't need our fasting. We don't fast as a kind of personal punishment for our sins. We cannot pay God back for sins but we can only confess them to Him to receive forgiveness. Fasting with a willing spirit and not just with an attitude of fulfilling a religious obligation means that we keep the purposes of fasting always before us which is to develop self control and to remember God and His Kingdom. That way we fast not only in what we eat but also in how *much* we eat. Fasting is simplicity of eating. We leave the table not with loaded stomachs. Being a little hungry during the day becomes a constant reminder of God, of our dependence on Him, and of the fact that the Lord alone can give us "food that lasts for eternal life" (Jn 6:27). In fasting and prayer, he reveals Himself to us as our true food and drink.

For a deeper discussion of fasting from a theological standpoint, read [Metropolitan Maximos'](#) excellent piece at the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. The [Rev. George Mastrantonis](#) has also written an excellent piece available on the same website.

Rules for Lenten Fasting in the Orthodox Church

In order to help in your Lenten Fasting, the following is a brief description of the Lenten Fast in terms of categories of food and times of abstinence of foods from the various categories. The purpose of this outline of the regulations on fasting is to help educate you on fasting and abstinence in general. This is the "letter of the law" on fasting. It is important for you and your family to participate in the "spirit of the law", working this out with your family and even your priest for your salvation.

Categories of Foods

Category I

Meat and Meat Products (includes beef, pork, chicken, etc., as well as items which have beef gelatin [such as some commercial brands of gelatin], lard [some commercial breads and crackers], etc.)

Category II

Dairy Products (includes butter, eggs, milk, cheese, etc., as well as items containing dairy whey, milk extracts, etc.)

Category III

Fish (includes sardines, tuna, bass, trout, shark, pike, etc. but not shell fish such as lobster, shrimp, crab, oysters, scallops, clams, mussels, etc.)

Category IV

Olive Oil (according to some, this would extend to all oil) and Wine (which includes all alcoholic beverages such as whiskey, beer, etc.)

Foods Permitted throughout Lent:

Shellfish (such as lobster, shrimp, crab, oysters, scallops, clams, mussels, etc.)

Vegetables and Vegetable products (including grains [rice, wheat, flour, pasta {non-egg pasta}, etc.] vegetable gelatins, etc.)

Fruit

Regulations on Fasting during Great Lent

Weekdays during Lent

Abstinence of Categories I, II, III, & IV.

No Abstinence of Shellfish, Fruit, Vegetables and Vegetable products.

During this period, we should regulate both the amount of food we consume as well as the frequency of eating. No food should be eaten between meals, and at meal times smaller quantities than normal should be eaten.

Saturdays and Sundays during Lent (*except Great Saturday on which a strict fast is kept)

Abstinence of Categories I, II & III.

No abstinence of Category IV or of Shellfish, Fruit, Vegetables and Vegetable products. On Saturdays* and Sundays during the Great Fast, the quantity and frequency of meals is not restricted.

Feast of the Annunciation (March 25) and Palm Sunday

Abstinence of Categories I, II.

No abstinence of Category III & IV or of Shellfish, Fruit, Vegetables and Vegetable products. On these Great Feasts of the Church, the quantity and frequency of meals

is not restricted.

The Orthodox Church has set aside the following prescribed fasts:

- Every Wednesday and Friday unless some important feastday takes precedence over the fast.
- Great Lent
- Holy Week
- The Christmas Fast (November 15 through December 24)
- The Fast of the Theotokos (August 1 through August 14)
- The Fast of the Holy Apostles (Monday after All Saints Day through June 28)
- The Elevation of the Holy Cross (September 14)
- The Eve of Theophany (January 5)
- The Beheading of St. John the Baptist (August 29)

Fasting is not an end in itself but a means to an end. For a Christian there is no food that is ritually clean or unclean. Jesus said, "The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these are the things that make a person ritually unclean" (Mt. 15:18).

THUS FASTING FROM FOODS IS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE THAT MUST NECESSARILY BE ACCOMPANIED BY FASTING FROM EVIL.