

# The Meaning of the Great Fast\*

## The True Nature of Fasting

‘We waited, and at last our expectations were fulfilled’, writes the Serbian Bishop Nikolai of Ochrid, describing the Easter service at Jerusalem.’ When the Patriarch sang, “Christ is risen”, a heavy burden fell from our souls. We felt as if we also had been raised from the dead. All at once, from all around, the same cry resounded like the noise of many waters. “Christ is risen” sang the Greeks, the Russians, the Arabs, the Serbs, the Copts, the Armenians, the Ethiopians - one after another, each in his own tongue, in his own melody. Coming out from the service at dawn, we began to regard everything in the light of the glory of Christ’s Resurrection, and all appeared different from what it had yesterday; everything seemed better, more expressive, more glorious. Only in the light of the Resurrection does life receive meaning.’<sup>1</sup>

This sense of resurrection joy, so vividly described by Bishop Nikolai, forms the foundation of all the worship of the Orthodox Church; it is the one and only basis for our Christian life and hope. Yet, in order for us to experience the full power of this Paschal rejoicing each of us needs to pass through a time of preparation. ‘*We waited,*’ says Bishop Nikolai, ‘and at last our expectations were fulfilled.’ Without this waiting, without this expectant preparation, the deeper meaning of the Easter celebration will be lost.

So it is that before the festival of Easter there has developed a long preparatory season of repentance and fasting, extending in present Orthodox usage over ten weeks. First come twenty-two days (four successive Sundays) of preliminary observance; then the six weeks or forty days of the Great Fast of Lent; and finally Holy Week. Balancing the seven weeks of Lent and Holy Week, there follows after Easter a corresponding season of fifty days of thanksgiving, concluding with Pentecost.

Each of these seasons has its own liturgical book. For the time of preparation there is the Lenten Triodion or ‘Book of Three Odes’, the most important parts of which are here presented in English translation. For the time of thanksgiving there is the Pentekostarion, also known in Slav usage as the Festal Triodion.<sup>2</sup> The point of division between the two books is midnight on the evening of Holy Saturday, with Matins for Easter Sunday as the first service in the Pentekostarion. This division into two distinct volumes, made for reasons of practical convenience, should not cause us to overlook the essential unity between the Lord’s Crucifixion and His Resurrection, which together form a single, indivisible action. And just as the Crucifixion and the Resurrection are one action, so also the ‘three holy days’ (*triduum sanctum*) - Great Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday - constitute a single liturgical observance. Indeed, the division of the Lenten

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), *Missionary Letters*: abbreviated from the translation in *The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius*, no. 24 (1934), pp. 26-7.

<sup>2</sup> The Lenten Triodion is so entitled because on weekdays in the Great Fast the Canon at Mattins usually has only three Canticles, instead of eight as at other times of the year. To avoid confusion, we shall follow the Greek practice, reserving the name ‘Triodion’ to the volume for the Lenten period, and always referring to the volume for the period after Easter by the title ‘Pentekostarion’.

Triodion and the Pentekostarion into two books did not become standard until after the eleventh century; in early manuscripts they are both contained in the same codex.

What do we find, then, in this book of preparation that we term the Lenten Triodion? It can most briefly be described as *the book of the fast*. Just as the children of Israel ate the ‘bread of affliction’ (Deut. 16:3) in preparation for the Passover, so Christians prepare themselves for the celebration of the New Passover by observing a fast. But what is meant by this word ‘fast’ (*nisteia*)? Here the utmost care is needed, so as to preserve a proper balance between the outward and the inward. On the outward level fasting involves physical abstinence from food and drink, and without such exterior abstinence a full and true fast cannot be kept; yet the rules about eating and drinking must never be treated as an end in themselves, for ascetic fasting has always an inward and unseen purpose. Man is a unity of body and soul, ‘a living creature fashioned from natures visible and invisible’, in the words of the Triodion;<sup>3</sup> and our ascetic fasting should therefore involve both these natures at once. The tendency to over-emphasize external rules about food in a legalistic way, and the opposite tendency to scorn these rules as outdated and unnecessary, are both alike to be deplored as a betrayal of true Orthodoxy. In both cases the proper balance between the outward and the inward has been impaired.

The second tendency is doubtless the more prevalent in our own day, especially in the West. Until the fourteenth century, most Western Christians, in common with their brethren in the Orthodox East, abstained during Lent not only from meat but from animal products, such as eggs, milk, butter and cheese. In East and West alike, the Lenten fast involved a severe physical effort. But in Western Christendom over the past five hundred years, the physical requirements of fasting have been steadily reduced, until by now they are little more than symbolic. How many, one wonders, of those who eat pancakes on Shrove Tuesday are aware of the original reason for this custom - to use up any remaining eggs and butter before the Lenten fast begins? Exposed as it is to Western secularism, the Orthodox world in our own time is also beginning to follow the same path of laxity.

One reason for this decline in fasting is surely a heretical attitude towards human nature, a false ‘spiritualism’ which rejects or ignores the body, viewing man solely in terms of his reasoning brain. As a result, many contemporary Christians have lost a true vision of man as an integral unity of the visible and the invisible; they neglect the positive role played by the body in the spiritual life, forgetting St. Paul’s affirmation: ‘Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit . . . glorify God with your body’ (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Another reason for the decline in fasting among Orthodox is the argument, commonly advanced in our times, that the traditional rules are no longer possible today. These rules presuppose, so it is urged, a closely organized, non-pluralistic Christian society, following an agricultural way of life that is now increasingly a thing of the past. There is a measure of truth in this. But it needs also to be said that fasting, as traditionally practiced in the Church, has *always* been difficult and has *always* involved hardship. Many of our contemporaries are willing to fast for reasons of health or beauty, in order to lose weight; cannot we Christians do as much for the sake of the heavenly Kingdom? Why should the self-denial gladly accepted by previous generations of Orthodox prove such an intolerable burden to their successors today? Once St. Seraphim of Sarov was asked why the miracles of grace, so abundantly manifest in the

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<sup>3</sup> Vespers for Saturday of the Dead.

past, were no longer apparent in his own day, and to this he replied: 'Only one thing is lacking - a firm resolve'.<sup>4</sup>

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food - particularly in the opening days - involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do nothing' (John 15:5). If we always take our fill of food and drink, we easily grow overconfident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The observance of a physical fast undermines this sinful complacency. Stripping from us the specious assurance of the Pharisee - who fasted, it is true, but not in the right spirit - Lenten abstinence gives us the saving self-dissatisfaction of the Publican (Luke 18:10-13). Such is the function of the hunger and the tiredness: to make us 'poor in spirit', aware of our helplessness and of our dependence on God's aid.

Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element of weariness and hunger. Abstinence leads, not merely to this, but also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. Even if the fast proves debilitating at first, afterwards we find that it enables us to sleep less, to think more clearly, and to work more decisively. As many doctors acknowledge, periodical fasts contribute to bodily hygiene. While involving genuine self-denial, fasting does not seek to do violence to our body but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Most of us in the Western world habitually eat more than we need. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excessive weight and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.

It will be noted that in common Orthodox usage the words 'fasting' and 'abstinence' are employed interchangeably. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church made a clear distinction between the two terms: abstinence concerned the types of food eaten, irrespective of quantity, whereas fasting signified a limitation on the number of meals or on the amount of food that could be taken. Thus on certain days both abstinence and fasting were required; alternatively, the one might be prescribed but not the other. In the Orthodox Church a clear-cut distinction is not made between the two words. During Lent there is frequently a limitation on the number of meals eaten each day,<sup>5</sup> but when a meal is permitted there is no restriction on the amount of food allowed. The Fathers simply state, as a guiding principle, that we should never eat to satiety but always rise from the table feeling that we could have taken more and that we are now ready for prayer.

If it is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting, it is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting is not a mere matter of diet. It is moral as well as physical. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal to our Father's house. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means 'abstinence not only from food but from sins'. 'The fast', he insists, 'should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body': the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice.<sup>6</sup> It is

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<sup>4</sup> See V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957), p. 216.

<sup>5</sup> For details, see below, p. 17, The Rules of Fasting and p. 20, Days of Fast - An Outline.

<sup>6</sup> *Homilies on the Statues*, iii, 3-4 (P.G. [Patrologia Graeca] xlix, 51-3).

useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: 'You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother'.<sup>7</sup> The same point is made in the Triodion, especially during the first week of Lent:

As we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion . . .

Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord.

True fasting is to put away all evil,

To control the tongue, to forbear from anger,

To abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury.

If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God.

Let us keep the Fast not only by refraining from food,

But by becoming strangers to all the bodily passions.<sup>8</sup>

The inner significance of fasting is best summed up in the triad: *prayer, fasting, almsgiving*. Divorced from prayer and from the reception of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. It leads, not to contrition and joyfulness, but to pride, inward tension and irritability. The link between prayer and fasting is rightly indicated by Father Alexander Elchaninov. A critic of fasting says to him: 'Our work suffers and we become irritable. . . . I have never seen servants [in pre-revolutionary Russia] so bad tempered as during the last days of Holy Week. Clearly, fasting has a very bad effect on the nerves.' To this Father Alexander replies: 'You are quite right . . . . If it is not accompanied by prayer and an increased spiritual life, it merely leads to a heightened state of irritability. It is natural that servants who took their fasting seriously and who were forced to work hard during Lent, while not being allowed to go to church, were angry and irritable.'<sup>9</sup>

Fasting, then, is valueless or even harmful when not combined with prayer. In the Gospels the devil is cast out, not by fasting alone, but by 'prayer and fasting' (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29); and of the early Christians it is said, not simply that they fasted, but that they 'fasted and prayed' (Acts 13:3; compare 14:23). In both the Old and the New Testament fasting is seen, not as an end in itself, but as an aid to more intense and living prayer, as a preparation for decisive action or for direct encounter with God. Thus our Lord's forty-day fast in the wilderness was the immediate preparation for His public ministry (Matt. 4:1-11). When Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:28) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (3 [1] Kings 19:8-12), the fast was in both cases linked with a theophany. The same connection between fasting and the vision of God is evident in the case of St. Peter (Acts 10: 9-17). He 'went up on the housetop to pray about the sixth hour, and he became very hungry and wanted to eat'; and it was in this state that he fell into a trance and heard the divine voice. Such is always the purpose of ascetic fasting - to enable us, as the Triodion puts it, to 'draw near to the mountain of prayer.'<sup>10</sup>

Prayer and fasting should in their turn be accompanied by alms-giving - by love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness. Eight days before the opening of the Lenten fast, on the Sunday of the Last Judgment, the appointed Gospel is the

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<sup>7</sup> *Homilies on Fasting*, i, 10 (P.G. xxxi, 181B).

<sup>8</sup> Vespers For Sunday evening (Sunday of Forgiveness); Vespers for Monday and Tuesday in the first week.

<sup>9</sup> *The Diary of a Russian Priest* (London, 1967), p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> Mattins for Tuesday in the first week.

Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-46), reminding us that the criterion in the coming judgment will not be the strictness of our fasting but the amount of help that we have given to those in need. In the words of the Triodion:

Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let this be our way of life:  
Let us feed the hungry, let us give the thirsty drink,  
Let us clothe the naked, let us welcome strangers,  
Let us visit those in prison and the sick.  
Then the Judge of all the earth will say even to us:  
'Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.'<sup>11</sup>

This stanza, it may be noted in passing, is a typical instance of the 'evangelical' character of the Orthodox service-books. In common with so many other texts in the Triodion, it is simply a paraphrase of the words of Holy Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

It is no coincidence that on the very threshold of the Great Fast, at Vespers on the Sunday of Forgiveness, there is a special ceremony of mutual reconciliation:<sup>13</sup> for without love towards others there can be no genuine fast. And this love for others should not be limited to formal gestures or to sentimental feelings, but should issue in specific acts of almsgiving. Such was the firm conviction of the early Church. The second-century *Shepherd of Hermas* insists that the money saved through fasting is to be given to the widow, the orphan and the poor.<sup>14</sup> But almsgiving means more than this. It is to give not only our money but our time, not only what we *have* but what we *are*; it is to give a part of ourselves. When we hear the Triodion speak of almsgiving, the word should almost always be taken in this deeper sense. For the mere giving of money can often be a substitute and an evasion, a way of protecting ourselves from closer personal involvement with those in distress. On the other hand, to do nothing more than offer reassuring words of advice to someone crushed by urgent material anxieties is equally an evasion of our responsibilities (see Jas. 2:16). Bearing in mind the unity already emphasized between man's body and his soul, we seek to offer help on both the material and the spiritual levels at once.

'When thou seest the naked, cover him; and hide not thyself from thine own flesh.' The Eastern liturgical tradition, in common with that of the West, treats Isaiah 58:3-8 as a basic Lenten text. So we read in the Triodion:

While fasting with the body, brethren, let us also fast in spirit.  
Let us loose every bond of iniquity;  
Let us undo the knots of every contract made by violence;

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<sup>11</sup> Vespers for Saturday evening (Sunday of the Last judgement).

<sup>12</sup> Compare what is said in Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, *The Festal Menaion* (London, 1969), p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Performed at the end of the Sunday of Forgiveness Vespers. The priest stands beside the analogion, and the faithful come up one by one and venerate the ikon, after which each makes a prostration before the priest, saying: Forgive me, a sinner. The priest also makes a prostration before each, saying the same words; and then the other receives his blessing and kisses his hand. Meanwhile the choir sings quietly the irmoi of the Canon at Easter Mattins or else the Easter aposticha. After receiving the priest's blessing, the faithful may also ask forgiveness of one another.

<sup>14</sup> *Similitudes*, V, iii, 7.

Let us tear up all unjust agreements;  
Let us give bread to the hungry  
And welcome to our house the poor who have no roof to cover them,  
That we may receive great mercy from Christ our God.<sup>15</sup>

Always in our acts of abstinence we should keep in mind St. Paul's admonition not to condemn others, who fast less strictly: 'Let not him who abstains pass judgement on him who eats' (Rom. 14:3). Equally, we remember Christ's condemnation of outward display in prayer, fasting or almsgiving (Matt. 6:1-18). Both these Scriptural passages are often recalled in the Triodion:

Consider well, my soul: dost thou fast? Then despise not thy neighbor.  
Dost thou abstain from food? Condemn not thy brother.  
Come, let us cleanse ourselves by almsgiving and acts of mercy to the poor,  
Not sounding a trumpet or making a show of our charity. Let not our left hand know what our right hand is doing;  
Let not vainglory scatter the fruit of our almsgiving;  
But in secret let us call on Him that knows all secrets:  
Father, forgive us our trespasses, for Thou lovest mankind.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>15</sup> Vespers for Wednesday in the first week.

<sup>16</sup> Mattins for the Sunday of the Last Judgement; Vespers for Sunday evening (Sunday of Orthodoxy).

<sup>17</sup> Canticle Two, troparion 25.

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 *gerontes*, in case he makes some mistake in this.'<sup>18</sup>

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'.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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

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<sup>18</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, alphabetical collection (P.G. lxxv), Antony 37 and 38. The Greek term *geron* (in Russian, *starets*) means literally an old man - old, not necessarily in years, but in spiritual experience and wisdom. He is one endowed by the Holy Spirit with the gift of seeing into men's hearts and offering them guidance.

<sup>20</sup> Vespers for Monday in the first week.

<sup>21</sup> All these quotations are from Mattins for the first Monday.

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.<sup>22</sup>

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 theaters were closed and public spectacles forbidden during Lent;<sup>23</sup> and even today weddings are forbidden in the seven weeks of the fast.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

Fifthly and finally, our Lenten abstinence *does not imply a rejection of God’s creation*. As St. Paul insists, ‘Nothing is unclean in itself’ (Romans 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.<sup>26</sup> Thus the soul as well as the body can become carnal and fleshly, and the body

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<sup>22</sup> Vespers for Wednesday in the week before Lent.

<sup>24</sup> Council of Laodicea (c. A.D. 364), Canon 52. Dispensations from this rule require episcopal permission, which should not be granted except for grave reasons.

<sup>25</sup> Mattins for Monday in the first week.

<sup>26</sup> The liturgical texts however, do not always conform to this Biblical usage, but sometimes employ the word ‘flesh’ as a synonym for ‘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 all 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.<sup>27</sup>

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, 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 forever.

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<sup>27</sup> Canticle Nine, troparion 12.

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.<sup>28</sup>

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 Mattins 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.<sup>29</sup>

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 ikons, 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,  
Filling it with the divine beauty.  
This our salvation we confess in deed and word,  
And we depict it in the holy ikons.<sup>30</sup>

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 ikons, 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

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<sup>28</sup> The Great Canon, Canticle Eight; irmos; Compline for Holy Thursday; Mattins for the Sunday of the Cross: Mattins for Palm Sunday.

<sup>29</sup> The Persian Mani (c. 216-76), founder of Manichaeism, advocated an uncompromising dualism. He considered that there is no salvation for man's body or for the rest of the material creation; the particles of light imprisoned in man are to be released through strict asceticism, including vegetarianism.

<sup>30</sup> Kontakion for the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

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 Historical Development of the Great Fast<sup>31</sup>

Lent, as it exists today in the Orthodox Church is the result of a long historical development, of which no more than a brief summary can be offered here.<sup>32</sup> The portion of the Church's Year covered by the Lenten Triodion falls into three periods:

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<sup>31</sup> The title 'Great Fast' serves to distinguish Lent from the three other seasons of fasting in the Orthodox calendar: the Christmas Fast, the Fast of the Apostles, and the Dormition Fast. For details see *The Festal Menaion*, p. 42, n.3.

<sup>32</sup> The history of Lent is concisely discussed in A. Schmemmann, *Great Lent* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1969), pp. 119-22. This book is the best introduction to the whole subject in English by an Orthodox author. The chief Patristic evidence and the older bibliography is given in two articles by E. Vacandard, 'Carême (Jeûne du)', *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, ii (Paris, 1905), cols. 1724-50, and 'Carême', *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, ii (Paris, 1910), cols. 2139-58. For more recent views, see R. Pierret, 'Carême (Spiritualité du). I. Histoire', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, ii, I (Paris, 1937), cols. 136-40; P.M. Gy and I.H. Dalmais, 'Carême', *Catholicisme*, ii (Paris, 1949), cols. 547-56; A. Baumstark, *Liturgic comparée*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. revised by B. Botte (Chevetogne, 1953), pp. 211-21 (Eng. ed., *Comparative Liturgy*, tr. F.L. Cross [London, 1958], pp. 190-9); A.A. McArthur, *The Evolution of the Christian Year* (London, 1953), pp. 77-139.

For the development of the Lenten Triodion, the fundamental study, not yet superseded, is in Russian: I.A. Karabinov, *Postnaia Triod* (St. Petersburg, 1910). Two works in Greek draw extensively on this: Archimandrite Kallistos (Miliaras), *Istoriki episkopisis tou Triodion. To schedion kai o katartismos avtou*, in the periodical of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem *Nea Sion* xxix (1934), pp 44-61, 153-61, 177-84, 330-46, 452-67, 502-16, 553-70, 609-15; and Evangelos D. Theodorou, *I morphotiki axia tou ischyontos Triodion* (Athens, 1958).

The Biblical and Patristic attitude to fasting is ably summarized in P. Deseille and H.J. Sieben 'Jeûne', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, viii (Paris 1974), cols. 1164-79. Fuller but less

(1) *The Pre-Lenten Period*: three preparatory Sundays (the Publican and the Pharisee; the Prodigal Son; the Last Judgement), followed by a preliminary week of partial fasting, ending with the Sunday of Forgiveness.

(2) *The Forty Days of the Great Fast*, beginning on Monday in the first week (or, more exactly, at Sunday Vespers on the evening before), and ending with the Ninth Hour on Friday in the sixth week.

(3) *Holy and Great Week*, preceded by the Saturday of Lazarus and Palm Sunday.

The third of these three periods, the Paschal fast of Holy Week, is the most ancient, for it was already in existence during the second and third centuries. The fast of forty days is mentioned in sources from the first half of the fourth century onwards. The pre-Lenten period developed latest of all: the earliest references to a preliminary week of partial fasting are in the sixth or seventh century but the observance of the other three preparatory Sunday did not become universal in the Greek East until the tenth or eleventh century.

(1) *The Paschal Fast in the second and third centuries*. In the second century it was the custom for Christians in both East and West to observe, immediately before Easter Sunday, a short fast of one or two days, either on Saturday only or on Friday and Saturday together.<sup>33</sup> This was specifically a Paschal fast in preparation for the service of Easter night. It was a fast of sorrow at the absence of the Bridegroom, in fulfillment of Christ's own words: 'But the days will come, when the Bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days' (Mark 2: 20). The fast, whether of one or two days, was in principle a total one, without any food or drink being taken at all.

By the middle of the third century, this Paschal fast had in many places been extended to embrace the entire week from Monday to Saturday. There was, however, no uniformity of practice, and some Christians fasted for less than the full six days. Only a few can have managed to keep a total fast throughout the whole period. In some places it was the practice to eat bread and salt, with water, at the ninth hour (3 p.m.) on the four days from Monday until Thursday, and then to keep, if possible, a total fast on Friday and Saturday but not all the faithful were as strict as this.<sup>34</sup> In this

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systematic is Chrysostom M. Enisleidis, *O thesmos tis nisteias* (Athens, 1958-9; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Thessalonica, 1972).

For Orthodox liturgical commentaries on Lent and Holy Week, see: (i) C. Andronnikof, 'La "Pré-Quarantaine" ou les semaines préparatoires au Carême', *Liturgie et Remission des Péchés. Conférences Saint-Serge: xxe Semaine d'Etudes Liturgiques* (Rome, 1975), pp 9-37; (ii) 'Un Moine de l'Eglise d'Orient' [Archimandrite Lev (Gillet)], *L'an de grâce du Seigneur*, vol. ii (Editions An-Nour, Beirut, 1972), pp. 7-76, 165-86; (iii) A. Schmemmann, *Holy Week. A Liturgical Explanation for the Days of Holy Week* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, no date); (iv) A. Schmemmann and O. Clément, *Le Mystère pascal. Commentaires liturgiques*, ed. P. Desille (Collection 'Spiritualité Orientale', No. 16: Bellefontaine, 1975), the first part of which is a French translation of (iii).

<sup>33</sup> See Irenaeus, cited by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, xxiv, 12; Tertullian, *On the Fasts*, 2, 13-14 (P.L. [Patrologia Latina] ii, 956A, 971B-974A); Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 20 (ed. Botte, p. 42).

<sup>34</sup> See Dionysius of Alexandria, Canon I (*Letter to Basilides*: P.G. x, 1277A); *Didascalia Apostolorum* 21 (ed. R. H. Connolly, p. 189).

six-day Paschal fast may be seen the distant origins of Holy Week; but the developed ritual to which we are accustomed, with special commemorations on each day of the week, is not found until the late fourth century.<sup>35</sup> During the pre-Nicene period, there seems to have been a unitary mystery, at the Paschal vigil lasting from Saturday evening until Easter Sunday morning. Friday was kept as a fast in preparation for this vigil, but it had not as yet become a distinct and specific commemoration of the Crucifixion; the Cross and the Resurrection were celebrated together during Easter night.

(2) *The Fast of Forty Days*. There is no evidence of a forty-day fast in the pre-Nicene period. The first explicit reference to such a fast is in Canon 5 of the Council of Nicaea (325), where it is treated as something familiar and established, not as an innovation on the part of the Council.<sup>36</sup> By the end of the fourth century the observance of a forty-day fast seems to have been the standard practice in most parts of Christendom, but in some places - possibly including Rome - a shorter fast may have been kept.

This forty-day fast, found in evidence from the fourth century onwards, differs somewhat in scope and character from the one-week fast of the pre-Nicene period, and the precise relationship between the two is not easy to determine. It has been suggested that the forty-day fast was originally connected with Epiphany rather than Easter; but the evidence for this seems inconclusive. It is, however, clear that whereas the pre-Nicene fast was specifically a Paschal observance in preparation for Easter, the forty-day fast was connected more particularly with the final preparation of the catechumens for the sacrament of Baptism or 'illumination'. In the weeks before their baptismal initiation, the candidates underwent a period of intensive training, with daily instruction, special services and fasting. The existing members of the church community were encouraged to share with the catechumens in this prayer and abstinence, thus renewing year by year their baptismal dedication to Christ. So the forty-day fast came to involve the whole body of the faithful, and not just those preparing for Baptism.

Lent, as we know it, is thus the result of a convergence between these two elements - between the six-day pre-Nicene fast, which was directly in Preparation for Easter, and the forty-day post-Nicene fast, which originally formed part of the training of candidates for Baptism. It was natural that these two elements should become fused into a single observance, for they both have the same end-point the night of Holy Saturday. The Paschal vigil on this night, in celebration of the death, burial and rising of Christ, was for obvious reasons chosen as the occasion for administering Baptism; for this sacrament is precisely an initiation into the Lord's Cross and His Resurrection (see Rom. 6: 3-4).

Today in most parts of the Church there is no organized catechumenate, and it is customary to administer Baptism on many other occasions besides the night of Holy Saturday; yet the baptismal significance of Lent has still a living importance. For every member of the Christian community,

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<sup>35</sup> Nothing is said about these daily commemorations in the *Catechetical Homilies* of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, delivered c. 350, but they are described in detail by the pilgrim Egeria, who was in Jerusalem for Lent and Holy Week c. 381-4: see her *Travels*, 27-38, (tr. J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* [London 1971], pp. 128-39).

<sup>36</sup> For references to a forty-day fast in the period immediately following Nicaea, see Athanasius, *Festal Letters* for the years 330-41, and Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Feast of Pascha*, 4-5 (P.G. xxiv, 697c-700c), dating from c. 329.

Lent is a time of spiritual training and renewed illumination. It is a time to realize afresh that, by virtue of our baptismal initiation, we are crucified, buried and risen with Christ; it is a time to reapply to ourselves the words of St. Paul, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20). It is a time for us to listen more closely to the voice of the Spirit in whom we were sealed at our Chrismation, immediately after our 'burial' in the baptismal waters.

The choice of the number forty for the days of Lent has obvious Biblical precedents. The people of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness (Exod. 16:35); Moses remained fasting for forty days on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:28); Elijah abstained from all food for forty days as he journeyed to Mount Horeb (3 [I] Kgs. 19:8). Most important of all, Christ fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1).

But how are the forty days to be computed? In the fourth and fifth centuries, the manner of reckoning varied. Some kept a fast of six weeks, some of seven or even eight.<sup>37</sup> Three points arose:

- (a) Is Holy Week included in the forty days, or treated as a distinct and additional period?
- (b) Is Saturday regarded as a day of fasting?
- (c) Are the forty days reckoned continuously, including Saturdays and Sundays? Or is Sunday excluded from the calculation and Saturday also, if this is considered not to be a day of fasting?

Divergent answers to these three questions account for present-day differences between the Western and the Orthodox Lent. At Rome Holy Week was included as part of the forty days, Saturday was regarded as a day of Fasting,<sup>38</sup> but in calculating the number forty all Sundays were excluded from the reckoning. This produced a six-week fast of six days in each week, constituting a total of thirty-six days. To make up the full measure of forty days, four further days of fasting were then added at the beginning, with the result that Lent in the West commences on a Wednesday.<sup>39</sup>

At Constantinople, on the other hand, Holy Week - together with the Saturday of Lazarus and Palm Sunday - was not regarded as part of the forty-day fast in the strict sense. At Vespers on Friday evening in the sixth week, immediately preceding the Saturday of Lazarus, the distinction between the forty days and Holy Week is very clearly marked in the existing text of the Triodion:

Having completed the forty days that bring profit to our soul,  
We beseech Thee in Thy Love for man:  
Grant us also to behold the Holy Week of Thy Passion. . . .

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<sup>37</sup> See Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, 22 (P.G. lxxvii, 632B-633B); Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII, xix, 7 (ed. Bidez, p. 331) Egeria, *Travels*, 27 (tr. Wilkinson, p. 128).

<sup>38</sup> For the Latin custom of fasting on Saturday, see Pope Innocent I, *Letter to Decentius*, 4 (P.L. 1vi, 516A); Augustine, Letter xxxvi, *To Casulanus*, 2 (P.L. xxxiii, 136); John Cassian, *Institutes*, iii, 9-10. The Latin practice is condemned by the Council in Trullo (A.D. 692), Canon 55, which forbids fasting on Saturdays with the sole exception of Holy Saturday (thus confirming the ruling of Apostolic Canon 66 [64]).

<sup>39</sup> The earliest clear testimony to the addition of these four days is the Gelasian Sacramentary (early eighth century), but there are hints of the addition in sources going back to the fifth century (see McArthur, *The Evolution of the Christian Year*, p. 137).

At Constantinople and in the East generally, Saturdays, with the one exception of Holy Saturday, were not considered days of fasting. But in reckoning the number forty it was the custom to count continuously, including Saturdays and Sundays in the calculation. Thus the forty days began on the first Monday in Lent and ended on Friday in the sixth week; then came Lazarus Saturday, Palm Sunday and Holy Week, which, while distinct from the forty days, were treated as part of the Lenten Fast in the broader sense. In this way the forty days and Holy Week together constituted a fast of seven weeks. So it is that Lent begins on Ash Wednesday in Western Christendom, while commencing in the East two days earlier on Monday.

Christians in the Greek East, however, while as a rule counting the forty days continuously, have sometimes chosen to exclude Saturday and Sunday from the calculation. With Holy Week included in the reckoning, this resulted in seven-week fast of five days in each week, adding up to thirty-five days. But since Holy Saturday is a day of fasting, this also was included, bringing the total number of days to thirty-six. As we have seen, the West before the addition of the four preliminary days likewise had a thirty-six day fast, although computed in a somewhat different manner. In both East and West this number of thirty-six has been given a symbolical meaning. Just as the Israelites dedicated to God a tithe or tenth of their produce, so Christians dedicate the season of Lent to God as a tithe or tenth of the year. The part is offered in token of the whole: rendering back to God a tenth of what He has given to us, we call down His blessing upon the remainder and acknowledge that all material goods and all moments of time are a gift from His hand. This notion of Lent as a *tithe or first-fruits of the year* is not much emphasized in the existing text of the Triodion, but it is mentioned in the Synaxarion for the Sunday of Forgiveness.<sup>40</sup>

(3) *The Completion of the Pattern.* In Constantinople from the sixth or seventh century onwards, there arose the practice of adding, before the seven weeks of the fast, an eighth or preliminary week of modified fasting. In our translation of the Triodion, we have termed this the 'Week before Lent'; it is often styled 'Cheese Week' or the 'Week without Meat', because during these days meat is forbidden but cheese and other dairy products are permitted. This preliminary week was added, among other reasons, from the same motive as led to the addition of four extra days at the start of Western Lent: so as to make up the full number forty. In the West, a six-week fast of six days in each week left four days missing from the requisite total. At Constantinople, on the other hand, the days of Lent were (as we have seen) reckoned continuously, and so there was no need of a further preliminary period to produce the total of forty days. But Christians in Palestine calculated in terms of eight weeks, with five days of fasting in each week (no special account being taken of Holy Saturday for the purposes of this reckoning); and so they needed an additional week at the beginning of Lent.

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<sup>40</sup> *Triodion Katanyktikon* (ed. Apostoliki Diakonia, Athens, 1960), p. 69. For Lent as a tithe of the year, see John Cassian, *Conferences*, xxi, 24-5; Dorotheus, *Teachings*, 15 (*P.G.* lxxxviii, 1788BC); Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospel*, xvi, 5 (*P.L.* lxxvi, 1137c). But the tithe symbolism is rejected by John of Damascus, *On the Holy Fasts*, 3 (*P.G.* xcv, 68c). For the Israelite offering of tithes, see Lev. 27:30-2; Deut. 14:22-4.

The observance of ‘Cheese Week’ in the existing Triodion represents a compromise between the Constantinopolitan and the Palestinian practice: for ‘Cheese Week’ is to be considered part of the fast, and yet it is not fully within Lent.<sup>41</sup>

During the sixth-eleventh centuries, the season of pre-Lenten preparation was gradually expanded to include three other preliminary Sundays: the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, ten weeks before Easter; following it, the Sunday of the Prodigal Son; and then the Sunday of the Last Judgement immediately before the beginning of ‘Cheese Week’. Together with the Sunday of Forgiveness at the end of ‘Cheese Week’, this makes four preliminary Sundays in all. In this way the full pattern of the Lenten season was completed. The Triodion, as we now have it, opens with the latest Sunday to be added, that of the Publican and the Pharisee.

## The Rules of Fasting

Within this developed pattern of Lent, what precisely do the rules of fasting demand? Neither in ancient nor in modern times has there ever been exact uniformity, but most Orthodox authorities agree on the following rules:

(1) During the week between the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee and that of the Prodigal Son, there is a general dispensation from all fasting. Meat and animal products may be eaten even on Wednesday and Friday.

(2) In the following week, often termed the ‘Week of Carnival’, the usual fast is kept on Wednesday and Friday. Otherwise there is no special fasting.

(3) In the Week before Lent, meat is forbidden, but eggs, cheese and other dairy products may be eaten on all days, including Wednesday and Friday.

(4) On weekdays (Monday to Friday inclusive) during the seven weeks of Lent, there are restrictions both on the *number* of meals taken daily and on the *types of food* permitted; but when a meal is allowed, there is no fixed limitation on the *quantity* of food to be eaten.

(a) On weekdays in the *first week*, fasting is particularly severe. According to the strict observance, in the course of the five initial days of Lent, only two meals are eaten, one on Wednesday and the other on Friday, in both cases after the Liturgy of the Presanctified. On the other three days, those who have the strength are encouraged to keep an absolute fast; those for whom this proves

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<sup>41</sup> Dorotheus, writing in Palestine c. 540-80, makes a clear reference to this eighth or preliminary week in *Teachings*, 15 (P.G. lxxxviii, 1788c). A cryptic passage in Theophanes, *Chronographia* for the year 6038, i.e. A.D. 546 (ed. de Boor, vol. i, p. 225), could be interpreted to mean that the preliminary week was observed at Constantinople as early as the reign of Justinian. But the Synaxarion for Saturday in the Week before Lent connects the introduction of ‘Cheese Week’ at Constantinople with the victories of the Emperor Heraclius over the Persian Chosroes in 629 or the years immediately following (*Triodion Katanyktikon* [ed. Apostoliki Diakonia], p. 61; cf. J. Goar, *Euchologion* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Venice, 1730], p. 175; V. Peri, ‘La durata e la struttura della Quaresima nell’ antico uso ecclesiastico gerosolimitano’, *Aevum* xxxvii [1963], p. 61). In the time of John of Damascus (first half of the eighth century), the observance of this preliminary week was as yet by no means universal in the Christian East: see *On the Holy Fasts* (P.G. xcv, 69-77).



impracticable may eat on Tuesday and Thursday (but not, if possible, on Monday), in the evening after Vespers, when they may take bread and water, or perhaps tea or fruit-juice, but not a cooked meal. It should be added at once that in practice today these rules are commonly relaxed. At the meals on Wednesday and Friday *xerophagy* is prescribed. Literally this means 'dry eating'. Strictly interpreted, it signifies that we may eat only vegetables cooked with water and salt, and also such things as fruit, nuts, bread and honey. In practice, octopus and shell-fish are also allowed on days of xerophagy; likewise vegetable margarine and corn or other vegetable oil, not made from olives. But the following categories of food are definitely excluded:

- (i) meat;
- (ii) animal products (cheese, milk, butter, eggs, lard, dripping);
- (iii) fish (i.e. fish with backbones);
- (iv) oil (i.e. olive oil) and wine (i.e. all alcoholic drinks).

(b) On weekdays (Monday to Friday inclusive) in the *second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth weeks*, one meal a day is permitted, to be taken in the afternoon following Vespers, and at this one meal xerophagy is to be observed.<sup>42</sup>

(c) *Holy Week*: On the *first three days* there is one meal each day, with xerophagy; but some try to keep a complete fast on these days or else they eat only uncooked food, as on the opening days of the first week.

On *Holy Thursday* one meal is eaten, with wine and oil (i.e. olive oil).

On *Great Friday* those who have the strength follow the practice of the early Church and keep a total fast. Those unable to do this may eat bread, with a little water, tea or fruit-juice, but not until sunset, or at any rate not until after the veneration of the Epitaphion at Vespers.

On *Holy Saturday* there is in principle no meal, since according to the ancient practice after the end of the Liturgy or St. Basil the faithful remained in church for the reading of the Acts of the Apostles, and for their sustenance were given a little bread and dried fruit, with a cup of wine. If, as usually happens now, they return home for a meal, they may use wine but not oil; for on this one Saturday, alone among the Saturdays of the year, olive oil is not permitted.

The rule of xerophagy is relaxed on the following days:

(1) On *Saturdays and Sundays* in Lent, with the exception of Holy Saturday, two main meals may be taken in the usual way, around mid-day and in the evening, with wine and olive oil; but meat, animal products and fish are not allowed.

(2) On the *Feast of the Annunciation* (25 March) and *Palm Sunday*, fish is permitted as well as wine and oil, but meat and animal products are not allowed. If the Feast of the Annunciation falls on

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<sup>42</sup> The early sources are not agreed concerning the application of the rule of xerophagy. The Council of Laodicea, Canon 50, and Theodore the Studite, *Doctrina Chronica*, 9, (P.G. xcix, 1700B), prescribe xerophagy on all weekdays in Lent; but John of Damascus, *On the Holy Fasts*, 5 (P.G. xcv, 69D), and Theodore Balsamon (Rallis-Potlis, *Syntagma*, vol. iii, p. 217) seem to envisage a less strict observance.

the first four days of Holy Week, wine and oil are permitted but not fish. If it falls on Great Friday or Holy Saturday, wine is permitted, but not fish or oil.

(3) Wine and oil are permitted on the following days, if they fall on a weekday in the second, third, fourth, fifth or sixth week:

First and Second Finding of the Head of St. John the Baptist (24 February)

Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (9 March)

Forefeast of the Annunciation (24 March)

Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel (26 March)

Patronal festival of the Church or Monastery

(4) Wine and oil are also allowed on Wednesday and Thursday in the fifth week, because of the vigil for the Great Canon. Wine is allowed - and, according to some authorities, oil as well - on Friday in the same week, because of the vigil for the Akathistos Hymn.

It has always been held that these rules of fasting should be relaxed in the case of anyone elderly or in poor health. In present-day practice, even for those in good health, the full strictness of the fast is usually mitigated. Only a few Orthodox today attempt to keep a total fast on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday in the first week, or on the first three days in Holy Week. On weekdays - except, perhaps, during the first week or Holy Week - it is now common to eat two cooked meals daily instead of one. From the second until the sixth week, many Orthodox use wine, and perhaps oil also, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and less commonly on Mondays as well. Permission is often given to eat fish in these weeks. Personal factors need to be taken into account, as for example the situation of an isolated Orthodox living in the same household as non-Orthodox, or obliged to take meals in a factory or school canteen. In cases of uncertainty each should seek the advice of his or her spiritual father. At all times it is essential to bear in mind that 'you are not under the law - but under grace' (Rom. 6:14), and that 'the letter kills, but the spirit gives life' (2 Cor. 3:6). The rules of fasting, while they need to be taken seriously, are not to be interpreted with dour and pedantic legalism; 'for the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:17).

\*The Meaning of the Great Fast was written by Archimandrite (now Metropolitan) Kallistos Ware from *The Lenten Triodion*, translated from the original Greek by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, published by Faber and Faber London · Boston, 1984.

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*"And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."*  
*Saint Matthew 6:16-18*

## DAYS OF FAST - AN OUTLINE\*\*

*The days of Fast in the Orthodox Catholic Church are as follows:*

1. The Eve of the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord: Dec. 24/Jan. 6.
2. The Eve of the Feast of the Theophany (the Baptism of Christ): Jan. 5/18.
3. The Feast of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist: Aug. 29/Sept. 11.
4. The Feast of the Exaltation of the Venerable Cross: Sept. 14/27.
5. All Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year, with the exception of these “fast-free” weeks and days:
  - a) The Week that follows the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee.
  - b) Cheese Fare Week (the week after Meat Fare Sunday-during this week all foods except meat and meat products are permitted).
  - c) Paschal Week (the week after the Sunday of Pascha).
  - d) Pentecost Week (the week after the Sunday of Pentecost).
  - e) Christmas Season: Dec. 25/Jan. 7 through Jan. 4/17.
  - f) Pentecost Season: from the week that follows Thomas Sunday up to and including the week before Pentecost, oil and wine are permitted on all Wednesdays and Fridays.
  - g) The Leave-taking (Apodosis) of Pascha, fish is permitted.
  - h) And also, throughout the year, on certain Saint’s Days, olive oil and wine are permitted (see list at the end of this paper).

Days	The Holy Canons Specify the Following	
Dec. 24/Jan. 6 Jan. 5/18 Aug. 29/Sept. 11 Sept. 14/27	<i>Abstinence of:</i>  Meat & Meat Products Dairy Products Fish Olive Oil Wine	<i>No Abstinence of:</i>  Shellfish Vegetables & Vegetable Products Fruit
All Wednesdays and Fridays (see exceptions above)	On these days of fast Orthodox Christians regulate both the amount of food they consume and the number of times per day they eat. In other words, <b>no</b> food should be eaten between meals and at meals only a small portion of food should be eaten. It is also often customary to eat only once a day.	

# SEASONS OF FAST - AN OUTLINE

*The seasons of Fast in the Orthodox Catholic Church are as follows:*

1. The Christmas Fast (Advent): Nov. 15/28 through Dec. 24/Jan 6.
2. The Fast of the Holy Apostles (The Peter & Paul Fast): From sundown on All Saints Sunday through June 28/July 11.
3. The Theotokos' Fast: Aug. 1/14 through Aug. 14/27.
4. The Great Fast: From sundown on Cheese-Fare Sunday through Great & Holy Saturday.

## The Christmas Fast and the Fast of the Holy Apostles - An Outline

Days	The Holy Canons Specify the Following	
Sunday Monday Tuesday Thursday Saturday	<i>Abstinence of:</i>  Meat & Meat Products Dairy Products	<i>No Abstinence of:</i>  Fish Shellfish Vegetables & Vegetable Products Olive Oil Fruit
Wednesday Friday	Orthodox Christians maintain the same fast & abstinence on these days as they do on all Wednesdays, Fridays & other days of Fast <i>(see outline on previous page)</i> .	
<b>NOTE:</b> During the Christmas Fast, from Dec. 13/26 to Dec. 24/Jan. 6 inclusive, the Fast becomes stricter, and olive oil and wine are permitted only on Saturdays and Sundays. Also, fish is not permitted on any day during this period.		

# The Theotokos' Fast - An Outline

(August 1/14 - 14/27)

Days	The Holy Canons Specify the Following	
Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday	<i>Abstinence of:</i>  Meat & Meat Products Dairy Products Fish Olive Oil Wine	<i>No Abstinence of:</i>  Shellfish Vegetables & Vegetable Products Fruit
	On these days during the Theotokos' Fast, Orthodox Christians regulate both the amount of food they consume and the number of times per day they eat. In other words, no food should be eaten between meals and at meals only a small portion of food should be eaten. Also, it is customary to eat only once during the day.	
Saturday Sunday	Oil and wine are permitted on these days, in addition to the foods permitted on weekdays.	
The Feast of the Transfiguration of Christ (Aug. 6/19)	<i>Abstinence of:</i>  Meat & Meat Products Dairy Products	<i>No Abstinence of:</i>  Fish Shellfish Vegetables & Vegetable Products Fruit Olive Oil Wine
<b>NOTE:</b> If the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos should fall on a Wednesday or Friday, the same foods are permitted as those permitted for the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration.		

## For the Period of the Triodion and the Great Fast

Weeks or Days	The Holy Canons Specify the Following	
For the Week that follows the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee	All foods are permitted throughout this week.	
Meat Fare Week (the week that follows the Sunday of the Prodigal Son)	This is a normal week. On Wednesday and Friday of this week, shellfish, vegetables, vegetable products and fruits are permitted but not olive oil and wine. All foods are permitted on all the other days of this week.	
Cheese Fare Week (the week that follows Meat Fare Sunday)	<i>Abstinence of:</i> Meat & Meat Products	<i>No Abstinence of:</i> Dairy Products Fish Shellfish Vegetables & Vegetable Products Fruit Olive Oil Wine
FROM Sundown on Cheese Fare Sunday to Pascha	<i>Abstinence of:</i> Meat & Meat Products Dairy Products Fish Olive Oil Wine	<i>No Abstinence of:</i> Shellfish Vegetables & Vegetable Products Fruit  During this period Orthodox Christians regulate both the amount of food they consume and the number of times per day they eat. In other words, <b>no</b> food should be eaten between meals and at meal time only a small portion of food should be eaten.
Saturdays* and Sundays throughout the Great Fast  *(All but Great Saturday on which a strict fast is kept)	<i>Abstinence of:</i> Meat & Meat Products Dairy Products Fish	<i>No Abstinence of:</i> Shellfish Vegetables & Vegetable Products Fruit Olive Oil Wine
On Saturdays* and Sundays during the Great Fast the quantity and the number of times food may be consumed is not restricted.		

## Feast of the Annunciation (Mar. 25/Apr. 7) and Palm Sunday

Weeks or Days	The Holy Canons Specify the Following	
Feast of the Annunciation (Mar. 25/Apr. 7) and Palm Sunday	<i>Abstinence of:</i> Meat & Meat Products Dairy Products	<i>No Abstinence of:</i> Fish Shellfish Vegetables & Vegetable Products Fruit Olive Oil Wine

### CLARIFICATION:

*Dairy Products:* butter, eggs, milk, cheese, etc.

*Shellfish:* oysters, shrimp, scallops, clams, etc.

*Fish:* sardines, tuna, trout, bass, pike, etc.

*Wine:* (all alcoholic beverages extended to include whiskey, beer, etc.)

The regulations for fasting have been taken from all the Holy Canons and Interpretations found in **THE RUDDER** (*Pedalion*) which contains all the Sacred and Divine Canons of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: The Orthodox Christian Church.

## The Feast Days on Which Oil and Wine are Permitted

Sept. 1 - Beginning of the Ecclesiastical Year. St. Symeon the Stylite.

Sept. 6 - Miracle of Archangel Michael in Chonae.

Sept. 8 - Birth of the Theotokos. FISH is also permitted on this day.

Sept. 9 - Sts. Joachim and Anna.

Sept. 13 - Consecration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Prefestival of the Venerable Cross.

Sept. 20 - St. Eustace (Eustathius) the Great Martyr and his family.

Sept. 23 - Conception of the Holy Forerunner and Baptist, John.

Sept. 26 - St. John the Theologian and Evangelist.

Oct. 1 - Holy Protection.

Oct. 6 - Holy Apostle Thomas.

Oct. 18 - Holy Apostle Luke the Evangelist.

Oct. 23 - St. James, the Brother of God and first bishop of Jerusalem.

Oct. 26 - St. Demetrius the Myrrh-streaming.

Nov. 1 - Sts. Cosmas and Damian of Asia Minor, the Unmercenary Healers.

Nov. 8 - Synaxis of the Archangel Michael and of all the Bodiless Hosts.

Nov. 12 - St. John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria.

Nov. 13 - St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople.

Nov. 14 - Holy Apostle Philip. FISH is also permitted on this day.

Nov. 16 - Holy Apostle Matthew the Evangelist.

Nov. 21 - Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple. FISH is also permitted on this day.

Nov. 25 - St. Catherine the Great Martyr. Leave-taking of the Feast of the Entry of the Theotokos

Nov. 30 - Holy Apostle Andrew the First-called.

Dec. 4 - St. Barbara the Great Martyr. St. John of Damascus.

Dec. 5 - St. Sabbas the Sanctified.

Dec. 6 - St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, Bishop of Myra of Lycia.

Dec. 9 - Conception by St. Anna of the Holy Theotokos.

Dec. 12 - St. Spyridon the Wonderworker, Bishop of Trimythion of Cyprus.

Dec. 13 - Sts. Eustratius, Auxentius, Eugene, Mardarius and Orestes at Sebaste. St. Lucy of Sicily.

Dec. 15 - St. Eleutherius the Bishop-Martyr of Illyria.

Dec. 17 - Holy Prophet Daniel and the Three Children Ananias, Azarias and Mishael. St. Dionysius of Zante.

Dec. 20 - Prefestival of the Holy Nativity of Our Savior. St. Ignatius the God-bearer.

Dec. 25 - Holy Nativity of Our Savior. All foods permitted up to and including Jan. 4/17.

Jan. 6 - Holy Theophany. All foods permitted.

Jan. 7 - Synaxis of Holy Forerunner and Baptist, John. FISH is also permitted on this day.

Jan. 11 - St. Theodosius the Great, the Cenobiarch.

Jan. 12 - St. Sabbas of Serbia (The Church of Serbia and Greece celebrate St. Sabbas on Jan. 14).

Jan. 14 - Leave-taking (Apodosia) of Holy Theophany.

Jan. 16 - Veneration of the Precious Chains of St. Peter the Apostle.

Jan. 17 - St. Anthony the Great.

Jan. 18 - Sts. Athanasius and Cyril, Patriarchs of Alexandria.

Jan. 20 - St. Euthymius the Great.

Jan. 22 - Holy Apostle Timothy. St. Anastasius the Persian.

Jan. 25 - St. Gregory the Theologian

Jan. 27 - Translation of the Relics of St. John Chrysostom.

Jan. 30 - Three Hierarchs: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom.

Feb. 2 - Meeting of Our Lord God and Savior, Jesus Christ. FISH is also permitted on this day.

Feb. 8 - St. Theodore the Commander. Holy Prophet Zachary.

Feb. 10 - St. Charalampus the Great Martyr.

Feb. 11 - St. Blaise the Hieromartyr. St. Theodora the Empress.

Feb. 17 - St. Theodore the Tyro.

Feb. 24 - The First and Second Finding of the Venerable Head of St. John the Baptist.

Mar. 9 - Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia.



Mar. 25 - Annunciation of the Theotokos. FISH is also permitted on this day.

Mar. 26 - Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel.

Apr. 23 - St. George the Great Martyr.

Apr. 25 - Holy Apostle Mark the Evangelist.

Apr. 30 - Holy Apostle James, brother of St. John the Theologian.

May 2 - Translation of the Holy Relics of St. Athanasius the Great.

May 8 - St. John the Theologian and Evangelist. St. Arsenius the Great.

May 11 - Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Equal to the Apostles.

May 15 - St. Pachomius the Great. St. Achillius, Archbishop of Larissa.

May 21 - Sts. Constantine and Helen, Equals to the Apostles.

May 24 - St. Simeon of the Wondrous Mountain.

May 25 - Third Finding of the Venerable Head of St. John the Baptist.

June 8 - Translation of the Holy Relics of St. Theodore the Commander.

June 11 - Holy Apostles Bartholomew and Barnabas.

June 24 - Birth of the Holy Forerunner and Baptist, John. FISH is also permitted on this day.

June 29 - Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. FISH is also permitted on this day.

June 30 - Synaxis of the Holy Twelve Apostles.

July 1 - Sts. Cosmas and Damian of Rome, the Unmercenary Healers.

July 2 - Deposition of the Holy Robe of the Theotokos.

July 8 - Kazan Icon of the Mother of God. St. Procopius the Great Martyr.

July 15 - St. Vladimir, Equal to the Apostles. St. Cyriacus and his mother, St. Julitta.

July 17 - St. Marina the Great Martyr.

July 20 - Holy Prophet Elias.

July 22 - St. Mary Magdalene the Myrrh-bearer. St. Marcella the Virgin Martyr.

July 25 - Repose of St. Anna, Mother of the Theotokos.

July 26 - St. Hermolaus. St. Parasceva of Rome.

July 27 - St. Panteleimon the Unmercenary Healer and Great Martyr.

Aug. 6 - Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord. FISH is also permitted on this day.

Aug. 15 - Dormition of the Holy Theotokos. FISH is also permitted on this day.

Aug. 31 - Deposition of the Venerable Sash of the Theotokos.

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*In addition to the above, oil and wine are permitted also on those days on which a local Saint is celebrated, or on days on which the local parish church celebrates its patron saint.*

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**\*\*Taken from: A Lenten Cookbook for Orthodox Christians, by St. Nectarios American Orthodox Church, Seattle, Washington, 5th printing 1991. Appendix pages J1 to J17. Fasting regulations prepared for A Lenten Cookbook for Orthodox Christians by Fr. Michael Henning, Buffalo, N.Y. and Edited by Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, MA.**