

Orthopraxis

On The True Nature of Fasting

by Bishop Kallistos (Ware)

In a true Fast (Gk. */nisteia/*; Sl. */post/*) - a balance must be kept 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.

Neither should we over-emphasize the external rules about food, nor should we scorn these rules as outdated. We are a unity of body and soul. But some, because of their heretical attitude towards human nature, create a false 'spiritualism' which rejects or ignores the body and view man solely in terms of his reasoning brain. This has caused a general decline in fasting. As to the argument that fasting rules are too difficult to follow in today's world, it can be said that fasting traditionally practiced in the Church has always been difficult and always involved hardship.

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. The purpose of its difficulty and hardship is to lead us into a sense of inward brokenness and contrition. On the other hand, abstinence/fasting leads us to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. Even though it might be 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.

St. John Chrysostom says the fast is "abstinence not only from food but from sins. The fast should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all members of the body."

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are central to the Lenten season. Divorced from prayer and from the reception of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. 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). Prayer and fasting should in turn be accompanied by almsgiving- the love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness.

Always in our acts of abstinence we should keep in mind St. Paul's admonition not to condemn others who fast less strictly.

Five misconceptions answered:

- 1) The Lenten fast is not intended only for monks and nuns, but is enjoined by all Orthodox Christians.
- 2) The Triodion should not be misconstrued in a Pelagian sense. Our progress in the fast does not depend solely upon the exertion of our own will. On the contrary, whatever we achieve is to be regarded as a free gift of God.
- 3) Our fasting should not be self-willed but obedient. Do not try to invent special rules for fasting, we should follow as faithfully as possible the accepted pattern set before us by Holy Tradition. If our fasting becomes willful and proud, it may assume a diabolical character, bringing us not closer to God, but to Satan. This is because fasting renders us sensitive to the realities of a spiritual world which can be dangerously ambivalent- for there are evil spirits as well as good.
- 4) Lent is a time for joyfulness, not gloom. John Climacus says it can bring us a "joy-creating sorrow." The season of Lent 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 the meaning "springtime."
- 5) Lenten abstinence does not imply a rejection of God's creation. 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 purification through self-discipline.

St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, Saratoga CA

St. Paul's usage of the word "flesh" denotes the totality of man, soul and body together

Focus on the Faith

The Meeting of the Lord (Presentation)

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

According to the Law of Moses, all Hebrew parents must bring their first born son on the fortieth day after birth to the Temple to be consecrated to God. It was the custom to bring a sacrifice in thanksgiving to God. The law was established in remembrance of the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt — freedom from slavery — when the first-born Hebrews were spared from death. In fulfillment of this law, the Mother of God with Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem and brought two doves for the sacrifice.

At this time in Jerusalem, there lived an old man by the name of Simeon. He was a righteous, pious man, and he awaited the coming of the Messiah. It was foretold to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen Christ the Lord. Simeon waited for the fulfillment of the promise of God for a long time. (According to tradition, he was one of the translators of the Septuagint, and lived more than 200 years!) Then, one day, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he went to the Temple. When Mary with Joseph brought the infant Jesus, Simeon met the Child, took Him in his arms, and glorifying God said, "Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, O Master, according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples, a light of revelation for the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel." Simeon called the newborn Lord as "a light to enlighten the Gentiles" (that is, all the tribes and nations) and "the glory of Thy people, Israel." There are two Israels: one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, it was the chosen Hebrew people or Israelites, and in the New Testament — the whole Orthodox Christian world.

Joseph and the Mother of God marveled at the words of Simeon. Simeon blessed them; and turning to the Mother of God, he prophesied to her about the Child: "Behold, this Child is set for the fall and rising

again of many in Israel; yea, a sword shall pass through Thy own soul, also." The meaning is that she herself would endure profound grief over her Son when He would suffer.

There was, in the Temple, the pious widow Anna, a prophetess, an eighty-four year old widow, who served God with fasting and prayers night and day. She recognized the Saviour and, coming in that instant, glorified the Lord and spoke of Him to all of those in Jerusalem who awaited the coming to earth of Christ the Saviour. When they had performed all things according to the Law of the Lord, the Mother of God with the Child and Joseph returned home.

This event, in which Saints Simeon and Anna met in the Temple the infant Christ presented by the Mother of God and Joseph and glorified Him, is called the Feast of the Meeting of the Lord and is celebrated in the Holy Orthodox Church on the 2nd of February as one of the great feast days.

From the Fathers

When Abba Agathon went down to the city to sell some of his baskets and to procure a little bread, he found near the market place an old, poor cripple.

"For the love of God, Abba," the cripple began to plead on seeing the Saint, "don't you, too, leave this poor wretch unaided. Bring me near to you."

Abba Agathon picked the man up and sat him next to him in the place where he had set up his baskets to sell them.

"How much money did you make, Abba?" the cripple would ask each time that the Elder sold a basket.

"Such and such," the Elder would tell him.

St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, Saratoga CA

"That's good enough," the cripple finally said. "Won't you buy me a little pie, Abba? That would be good of you, since I have not eaten since last evening."

"With pleasure," the Saint told him, immediately fulfilling the cripple's request.

Shortly thereafter, the cripple requested some fruit. And then some sweet. Thus, for each basket that was sold, the Saint spent the proceeds, until, thanks to his patronage, all of the baskets and money were gone, without his having kept even two pennies for himself. More importantly, he did this all with great eagerness, even though he knew that he would thus go perhaps two weeks without any bread for himself.

Since he had sold his last basket, the Saint got ready to leave the marketplace.

"So you're going?" the cripple asked him.

"Yes, I have completed all of my work."

"Uh, do me the favor of taking me as far as the crossroads, and you can leave for the desert from there," the strange old man again pleadingly said.

The good Agathon took the cripple on his back and carried him to the place where he wanted to go, though with great difficulty, since he was exhausted from his day's work.

As soon as he reached the crossroads and started to put down his living burden, he heard a sweet voice say to him:

"May you be blessed, Agathon, by God, both on earth and in Heaven."

The Saint raised up his eyes to see who it was who had spoken with him.

The would-be old man had completely disappeared, since he was an Angel sent by God to test the Saint's love. (Sayings of the Desert Fathers)

Charities

Homeless Shelter Dinners

St. Nicholas will be hosting dinners for the homeless at the Sunnyvale Armory February 7 and March 7. Please contact Ann Worobey to help with cooking, serving and cleaning up in this rewarding ministry.

Upcoming Events

Parish Annual Meeting – January 31

Please come Sunday January 31 to our Parish Annual meeting. Whether or not you are a voting member, we would like to hear your point of view on how the Church is doing and on the Church School and Charities and all other ministries.

The Meeting will be after the Divine Liturgy. We will also have a Potluck Lunch. (Please bring some food to share.)

Four parish council members (Brooks Szolyga, Marina Donnellan, John Simmons, and Paul Pilipenko are finishing their terms and their council seats will be available. If you have any inclination to help shape the future direction of the church or desire to be involved with managing some of its processes, the council is the ideal place for you.

To qualify for a council position, you have to be a voting member for at least six months. You will need to renew your membership this year. For lapsed and new voting members, you have to meet canonical requirements (see Father Basil if in doubt) and complete the membership side of the 2010 pledge form.

Lunches

Please sign up to host a lunch. It doesn't have to be complicated, just something to share to give us time to get to know each other.