

FASTING
IN THE
ORTHODOX
CHURCH



by

Archimandrite Akakios

CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST
ORTHODOX STUDIES

FASTING IN THE
ORTHODOX CHURCH

Its Theological, Pastoral, and
Social Implications

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Fasting in the Eastern Orthodox Church: The Legacy of the Early Church	I
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CHAPTER TWO

Asceticism and Eastern Christian Spirituality: A Theological Treatment of Fasting	34
--	----

CHAPTER THREE

Fasting and Contemporary Orthodoxy in the Americas	52
--	----

CHAPTER FOUR

Fasting and Pastoral Concerns	71
---	----

BIBLIOGRAPHY	82
------------------------	----

CHAPTER ONE

FASTING IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH: THE LEGACY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, Spalding Lecturer in Eastern Orthodox Studies at Oxford University, has observed that a “sense of resurrection joy...forms the foundation of all the worship of the Orthodox Church”; yet, he notes, “for us to experience the full power of this Paschal rejoicing, each of us needs to pass through a time of preparation.”¹ These words constitute an apt description of the rôle of fasting in the Orthodox Church. It is a prerequisite, an essential part of the process of preparation that leads to an Orthodox Christian’s participation in the Church’s worship, again a worship which is at all times inextricably bound to the Resurrection experience. Moreover, since the Resurrection is the ancient event *par excellence* of Christianity—the foundation of Christian faith, in the words of the Apostle Paul²—, its image also aptly calls us back to the Early Church; and therein lie the roots of the practice of fasting in the contemporary Christian world in general and of the development of a rather complex lenten order in the Orthodox Church.

Fasting in preparation for Pascha (Easter) was universal in the Early Church, both East and West, as evidenced by various second- and third-century references to the practice. Let us look, for example, at Eusebios’ reference in his *Church History* to Saint Irenæus’ (†202) words on the debate regarding the date for Pascha and the nature of the period of abstinence preceding it:

For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover,

¹ *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and [Bishop] Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), p. 13.

² 1 Corinthians 15:14, *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, (New York: Meridian Books, n.d.).

count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode.³

Not only does this reference establish that fasting before Pascha was already a custom in Saint Irenæus' day, but that it was apparently of even earlier, if not of Apostolic origin. With regard to the nature of fasting in this period, another text from the third century, Saint Hippolytos' († *ca.* 236) *Apostolic Tradition*, proves informative:

At the Pascha no—one may eat before the offering is made. If anyone does so, it does not count for him as fasting. Anyone who is pregnant or ill, and cannot fast for two days, should fast (only) on the Saturday on account of their necessity, confining themselves to bread and water.⁴

It is apparent from this passage that the pre-Paschal fast involved two days of fasting in the form of total abstinence from food, since those who were unable to fast were allowed, not a full array of food, but only bread and water. In another ancient source, variously assigned to the second and third centuries and of apparent Syriac origin, *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, we find confirmation of this conclusion and yet further information about the four days of food-restricted fasting which preceded the total fast appointed to Great (or Holy) Friday and Great Saturday:

Do ye therefore fast on the days of the passover [Great (Holy) Week], beginning from the second day of the week [Monday] until the preparation [Great Friday], and the Sabbath [Great Saturday], six days, making use of only bread, and salt, and herbs [*i.e.*,

³ Eusebius, *Church History*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Phillip Shaff and Henry Wace, 2nd ser., Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 243.

⁴ Geoffrey J. Cumming, *Hippolytus: A Text for Students* (Bramcote, England: Grove Books, 1976), p. 26.

vegetables], and water for your drink. Do ye who are able fast the day of the preparation and the Sabbath-day entirely, fasting till the cock-crowing of the night; but if anyone is unable to join them both together, at least let him observe the Sabbath-day; for the Lord says somewhere, speaking of Himself: "When the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, in those days shall they fast."⁵

By the fourth century, this pre-Paschal fast had undergone a transformation, both in form and length. It had been expanded to a forty-day period preceding Pascha and became centered—because of its long duration—more on the restriction in the kinds of food eaten than total abstinence from food, though, to be sure, days of total abstinence were still observed. Scholars generally agree that the first clear reference to Lent as such is contained in the Fifth Canon of the Synod (Council) of Nicæa in 325, which, as Bishop Kallistos observes, alludes to the practice as though it were "something familiar and established, not as an innovation on the part of the Council."⁶ The "Epitome" of Canon v reads as follows:

Such as have been excommunicated by certain bishops shall not be restored by others, unless the excommunication was the result of pusillanimity, or strife, or some other similar cause. And that this may be duly attended to, there shall be in each year two synods in every province—the one before Lent, the other toward autumn.⁷

Certainly "by the end of the fourth century," Bishop Kallistos concludes,

...the observance of a forty-day fast seems to have been the stan-

⁵ "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. the Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 447.

⁶ *Triodion*, p. 30.

⁷ *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees*, Vol. 14 of the 2nd ser. of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Phillip Shaff and Henry Wace, p. 13.

dard practice in most parts of Christendom, ...[though] in some places—possibly including Rome—a shorter fast may have been kept. ...Lent, as we know it, ...is the result of a convergence between...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, ...[but] came to involve the whole body of the faithful, and not just those preparing for Baptism.⁸

It is this prototypic period of fasting established in the fourth century—marked by a restriction in the types and quantity of food eaten and short periods of total abstinence from food—that serves as a model for the present-day lenten periods in the Orthodox Church, which are observed not only in preparation for Pascha but also before the Feasts of the Nativity (Christmas), the Apostles Peter and Paul, and the Dormition of the Virgin Mary.

Now, with regard to fasting in a more general sense, that is, outside the longer pre-Paschal Lent or lenten periods modelled on it, there are several references from the practice of the Early Church that command our attention. Again, in the *Apostolic Tradition*, Saint Hippolytos offers directives about fasting to both clergy and laity:

Widows and virgins shall fast often and pray for the Church. Presbyters shall fast if they wish, and laymen likewise. A bishop cannot fast except when the people do so. It happens that someone wishes to make an offering and he cannot refuse him; but in all cases he breaks and tastes.⁹

The directives here seem to suggest that the Early Church undertook fasting independently of the discipline appointed for Paschal preparation, joining it to prayer and practicing it at will. In fact, the practice seems so informal that a Bishop, entrusted with the care of his flock, is instructed to break any fast that he might have undertaken, rather than insult someone who offers him something. Apparently, only when a fast was appointed by

⁸ *Triodion*, p. 30.

⁹ Cumming, *Hippolytus*, p. 22.

the Church and binding on the Faithful and clergy alike was a Bishop to adhere to a rule of fasting. Once again, this is strong evidence that fasting was not restricted, in the Early Church, to festal preparation, as is the case in the spiritual life of the contemporary Orthodox Church, too. Moreover, fasting was strictly forbidden in the Early Church on Saturday and Sunday: "...Every Sabbath-day excepting one [Great Saturday], and every Lord's day, hold your solemn assemblies, and rejoice: for he will be guilty of sin who fasts on the Lord's Day, being the day of resurrection."¹⁰ This prohibition obviously applies to self-directed or self-appointed periods of fasting, since the Paschal Lent was subject, as we have seen, to very specific and explicit regulations that would not call for such a clarification. It is a prohibition also found in modern Orthodox practice.

As part of the integration of fasting into one's daily and personal spiritual life, apart from the Paschal Lent, it seems that Christians in the Early Church also regularly fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays during each week. In the *Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, we find reference to this custom that dates to the first years of the second century, if not probably much earlier. In the eighth chapter, the Faithful are advised as follows: "Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays [*deutera sabbaton*] and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays."¹¹ In *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, we see a remarkably similar prescription for the weekly Wednesday and Friday fasts:

But let not your fasts be with the hypocrites; for they fast on the second [*deutera*, or Monday] and fifth [*pempte*, or Thursday] days of the week. But do either fast the entire five days, or on the fourth day of the week [Wednesday], and on the day of the Preparation [Friday] because on the fourth day the condemnation went out against the Lord, Judas then promising to betray him for money;

¹⁰ "Constitutions," p. 449.

¹¹ *The Didache*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 321.

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Archimandrite Akakios provides us, in this erudite treatment of fasting in the Orthodox Church, with a rare combination of superb scholarship, practical pastoral insight, and spiritual sobriety. Drawing on the Fathers of the Church, Scripture, and the *corpus* of canonical commentaries on the subject, he brilliantly sets forth the pivotal place of fasting in the spiritual life of every Christian, Orthodox and heterodox alike. His commentary on the misunderstanding of fasting among Orthodox in the Americas is perhaps the most trenchant analysis of the Church in diaspora to be had in the English language, adding to an already striking work of scholarship and an indispensable pastoral guide to the theory and practice of fasting.

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