

## *Sunday of Forgiveness and the Great Lent.*

As we are about to begin the Fast of the Great Lent, our Church reminds us of Adam's expulsion from Paradise. God commanded Adam to fast (*Gen. 2:16*), but he did not obey. Because of their disobedience, Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden and lost the life of blessedness, knowledge of God, and communion with Him, for which they were created. Both they and their descendants became heirs of death and corruption.

Let us consider the benefits of fasting, the consequences of disobedience, and recall our fallen state. Today we are invited to cleanse ourselves of evil through fasting and obedience to God. Our fasting should not be a negative thing, a mere abstention from certain foods. It is an opportunity to free ourselves from the sinful desires and urges of our fallen nature, and to nourish our souls with prayer, repentance, to participate in church services, and partake of the life-giving Mysteries of Christ.

At Forgiveness Vespers we sing: *"Let us begin the time of fasting in light, preparing ourselves for spiritual efforts. Let us purify our soul, let us purify our body. As we abstain from food, let us abstain from all passion and enjoy the virtues of the spirit..."*

So, with the approach of Great Lent, Christians prepare their hearts, some with eager anticipation, others with reverence or even trembling, as they once again embark on the path of repentance. This season offers an opportunity to present to God a small sacrifice in response to His boundless love and suffering for our salvation. It is also a time to detach ourselves from worldly concerns and turn our gaze toward the heavenly, striving more for our spiritual growth.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the March this year we are starting to observe a 48-day fast before Pascha, including Holy Week, adhering to strict dietary rules that apply equally to monastics and laypeople. But was this always the case? In this article, we explore the early Christian traditions of Lenten fasting and how they evolved over time.

### *The Origins and Early Practices*

Fasting before Pascha developed gradually in the Christian Church. Until the third century, different regions observed various practices in preparation for the Feast of the Resurrection. In the first and second centuries, many Christians fasted with complete abstinence from food for one or two days, or for a total of 40 hours from the evening of Great Friday until the conclusion of the Paschal Liturgy. This was seen as a symbolic participation in Christ's suffering and a literal fulfilment of His words: "Can the wedding guests mourn if the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (*Matthew 9:15*). Early Christians believed that Christ was taken from them at His death on the Cross on Friday evening and remained absent until His Resurrection, thus justifying the 40-hour fast.

### *Preparation to Lent*

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (†202) noted the variety of fasting practices among early Christians: "Some think they should fast one day, others two, some more; some count their day as 40 hours, both day and night." He also emphasized that these differences did not cause discord in the Church: "This diversity in observance is not something of our time, but dates back to our forefathers. Yet despite this, all lived in peace with one another, and we continue to do so, for the difference in fasting affirms the unity of faith."

By the mid-third century, some local Churches extended the fast to six days, forming the foundation for what would become Holy Week. This extension was a natural outgrowth of pious Christians desiring a

longer period of preparation. However, many believers still adhered only to the shorter one or two-day fast, considering prolonged abstinence excessive.

Saint Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (†265), described the fast in his time: “The six days of fasting are not observed uniformly; some fast all six days, others not at all. Those who have grown weak from prolonged fasting and are near death from exhaustion may break the fast earlier, while others fast continuously only on Friday and Saturday.” This illustrates the severity of early Lenten practices, to the point that some were granted dispensation to break the fast before Pascha for the sake of their health.

By the fourth century, fasting during Holy Week had become a universal practice in the Church, though the sick and pregnant women were granted leniencies. The development of the forty-day fast was partly influenced by the combination of pre-Paschal and pre-baptismal fasting traditions.

### *The Influence of Baptismal Preparation on Lent*

In the early centuries, catechumens preparing for baptism were required to undergo extensive instruction, lasting two to three years, during which they prayed in the Church and learned the tenets of the faith. Prior to baptism, they observed a period of fasting, though its duration varied by region. The idea of fasting before making life-changing commitments had roots in the Old Testament, as seen in the fasts of Moses and Elijah, as well as Christ’s own forty-day fast in the wilderness.

Saint Justin Martyr (2nd century) recorded that Christians supported catechumens in their preparation by fasting and praying alongside them: “Those who are convinced of the truth of our teaching and promise to live accordingly are instructed to pray and fast for the remission of their past sins, and we pray and fast with them. Then we lead them to a place where there is water, and they are born anew... just as we ourselves have been.”

Since baptisms were often performed on the night of Pascha, it was natural for pre-baptismal fasting to merge with the Lenten fast. The desire of the faithful to support catechumens in their spiritual struggle contributed to the establishment of the forty-day fast.

Another contributing factor was the growing influence of monastic asceticism. Many revered spiritual fathers, including Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Jerome, and Saint Ambrose of Milan, encouraged a longer period of fasting in memory of Christ’s Passion. Saint Ambrose (†397) exhorted his flock: “If you desire to be a Christian, do as Christ did. He, though sinless, fasted for forty days, yet you, a sinner, refuse to fast? Consider... what kind of Christian are you if you indulge yourself while Christ hungered for your sake?”

### *From 40 Hours to 40 Days*

By the late fourth and early fifth centuries, the Local Churches had formally established the observance of the Forty-Day Fast (Holy Quadragesima) as obligatory for all Christians. References in the canons of the Ecumenical Councils and the writings of the Holy Fathers attest to the fact that a Christian who neglected to keep the Great Fast could face temporary excommunication from the Church.

Interestingly, in the early centuries, the duration of the Great Fast varied among different Churches, ranging from six to eight weeks. This discrepancy arose due to differences in how fasting days were counted. In the Eastern Churches, Saturdays and Sundays were not considered fasting days and were thus excluded from the count. Evidence of this practice is found in the account of the fourth-century Roman pilgrim Egeria (Etheria), who documented her observations of Lenten practices in Palestine: “Here, the fast lasts for eight weeks before Pascha... On Sundays and Saturdays, except for one [Holy Saturday], fasting is

not observed. That final Saturday is kept as a strict fast in preparation for the Paschal Vigil. Thus, when we exclude eight Sundays and seven Saturdays, we are left with forty-one fasting days, which are called 'eortae' [from the Greek, meaning 'festal days'], or as we would say, Holy Quadragesima."

From this, we see that in the early centuries, Christians observed a 40-day fast before Pascha, including Holy Week. Today, the Church prescribes a seven-week fast, lasting 48 days: 40 days constitute Holy Quadragesima (including weekends), followed by the six days of Holy Week. The Saturday of Lazarus and Palm Sunday, which fall between them, do not belong strictly to either period. Though observed with abstinence, these two days allow certain dietary concessions.

### *Lenten Dietary Regulations in the East and West*

The Eastern Churches embraced the forty-day fast with great enthusiasm, while the West was slower to adopt it, often maintaining more lenient fasting practices. The fourth-century Roman pilgrim Egeria provided a unique account of the Lenten fasting customs in Palestine: "On Saturdays, the Liturgy is celebrated early, before sunrise, to release those known as the 'Ebdomadarii' from their fast. These individuals fast for the entire week, consuming food only on Sundays after the dismissal of the service at the fifth hour [11 a.m.]. Having partaken of food on Sunday, they abstain again until the following Saturday morning, when they receive Communion in the Church of the Resurrection... There is also a special custom among those who call themselves 'Apotactites,' both men and women; they eat only once a day, not just during Lent, but throughout the entire year.

Among those who cannot endure a full week without food, some eat at midday on Thursdays. Others who are unable to do even this fast for two consecutive days within the week. Those who cannot manage that take their meal in the evening. No specific number of fasting days is imposed, each fasts according to their strength. No one is praised for doing more or condemned for doing less, for this is the custom here. During Holy Quadragesima, neither leavened bread, olive oil, nor fruits of the trees are consumed, only water and a small amount of porridge." Egeria's account highlights only the more striking ascetic practices that captured her attention. Other contemporary sources indicate that Lenten fasting traditions were quite diverse across different regions. These practices continued through the fifth to eighth centuries. Over time, however, instead of complete abstinence from food on certain days, new customs developed, such as refraining from specific types of food, most notably meat. Others abstained from eating until a designated hour. For example, in the fourth century, Saint Ephraim the Syrian instructed children to refrain from food at least until 9 a.m. during Holy Quadragesima, while those with greater endurance fasted until noon or even 3 p.m. Monastics observed even stricter disciplines, abstaining not only from dairy but also from cooked foods, restrictions that were not typically imposed on laypeople.

Today, some Eastern Orthodox Church follows the Jerusalem Typikon, established in the sixth century by Saint Sabbas the Sanctified in his Lavra in Palestine, which later spread throughout the Orthodox East. Simplifying its directives, the Typikon prescribes limiting meals to once a day in the evening and observing dry eating (bread, water, and raw vegetables without oil). Certain days require complete abstinence from food and water, such as Monday and Tuesday of the first week, as well as Thursday and Friday of the same week, and Great Friday of Holy Week. Fish is permitted only on the feast of the Annunciation (unless it coincides with Holy Week) and on Palm Sunday.

After the first week of Lent, from Monday to Friday, a single daily meal of simple food without oil (bread, water, and vegetables) is prescribed, except in specific cases. On Saturdays and Sundays, two meals are allowed, including the use of vegetable oil and a small amount of wine (up to one cup), as Saturdays and

Sundays are not considered full fasting days a distinction also reflected in the structure of liturgical services on these days.

In some countries adherence to these fasting rules was exceptionally strict. Even monks from the Antiochian Church were astonished by the rigor of the Russian Orthodox faithful fast. Archdeacon Paul of Aleppo, who visited Russia in the seventeenth century with his father, Patriarch Macarius of Antioch, recorded his experience: “During this fast, we endured great suffering, following them against our will, particularly in food. We found no sustenance other than gruel, resembling boiled peas and beans, for in this fast, they completely abstain from oil. Because of this, we experienced indescribable torment. How often we sighed and lamented over the meals of our homeland, swearing that no one should ever again complain about fasting in Syria.”

### *Balancing Strictness and Mercy*

Over time, the Orthodox Church recognized that such strict regulations were too burdensome for all believers, especially laypeople. Thus, the Church established a minimum standard of dietary abstinence that every Christian is expected to observe, namely, refraining from meat, dairy, and eggs. Allowances for fish and cooked vegetable meals with oil are considered a concession to human frailty. Even within monastic traditions, certain accommodations were made. For example, in the Solovetsky Monastery in northern Russia, where the climate was particularly harsh, significant leniencies were granted. Records indicate that during the first week of Lent, meals were not served on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday. On Tuesday and Thursday, monks ate bread with warm berry broth, pickled cabbage, and porridge. Throughout the remaining weeks, on fasting days, they were permitted one hot meal and two cold dishes, while on Saturdays (except Holy Saturday), they consumed warm food with oil. On Sundays, fish was also permitted. Nonetheless, it is always recommended that any dietary modifications be undertaken with the guidance of a spiritual father, with a focus on balancing physical fasting with spiritual endeavours.

### *Conclusion*

Reflecting on the history of Great Lent, we see that its development stemmed from a continuous desire among Christians to imitate Christ and offer Him a worthy sacrifice in gratitude for His suffering. As St. Paul writes, “*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice*” (Romans 12:1). At the same time, the fast is not about legalism but humility, repentance, and spiritual renewal. Whether through strict abstinence or modest efforts, the goal remains the same: to draw closer to God, offering Him our “first fruits” in gratitude for His boundless love. Christ gave Himself up for our sins, and we, if we are truly His disciples, should joyfully dedicate this ‘tithe of the year’ to Him, lightening the burdens of the flesh, lifting up our hearts, and allowing God to renew His image within us.

May this Lenten journey uplift your heart, refine your spirit, and prepare you to meet the risen Lord with joy.

*Wishing to all of us the Lord’s blessed and a peaceful time of the Great Lent I remain with you all in Christ.*

*Fr. Janis.*

*The Orthodox community of saint Kessog in Falkirk.*