

FASTING FOR NON-MONASTICS

Fasting and Life's Seasons Our life is not one uniform and monotonous continuum. Rather, it is a variety of seasons. Some easily come to mind—childhood, adulthood, old age—but there are others: pregnancy, for example, or preparing for an exam, or training for a competition, or travelling. We will touch on all of these, but let us begin with the natural seasons of our life: childhood, adulthood, and old age. Most of us probably know that infants, with the exception of Saint Nicholas, do not fast. It is said that the baby Nicholas refused his mother's milk on Wednesdays and Fridays, but even in this miraculous account we do not read that he abstained from milk during longer fasts, of which there would have been four in his first year of life. There is a limit to how long a baby can go without milk. At about the age of three, a young child may be taught the basics of self-control. At that age, there is still no need for a child to follow a monastic fasting rule, but even a three-year-old can be taught to give up a cookie on Friday. From approximately seven years of age, children should be mostly eating what the parents eat, with perhaps some adjustments. And, of course, it is assumed that the family follows the fasts of the Church. A parent, for example, may experiment with eating only once a day after vespers, but a child probably should not—at least, not for forty-nine days straight. Even if a child wishes to try some stricter asceticism, a parent will naturally want to guide the child in ways that are age-appropriate. Being a teenager or young adult is another one of life's seasons. This is a season of many stresses in life: school, sports, romantic relationships for which young people stay up half the night and then feel lousy for most of the next day. All of this makes it very difficult to add yet one more stressor. Fasting is a stressor. When one fasts, one has to exercise will power; one has to control oneself, limit one's appetite, and think ahead. But this season in life is also when young people really need to practice the skill of self-control and self-discipline. They are no longer children, and their parents are not always there to be their backbone. By now, they had better have their own backbone. This is why it is so important to begin fasting in some way and learning self-discipline when they are still young children. Following the turmoil of the young adult years, roughly half the young people will get pregnant. The guys may think that this does not apply to them, but the new Affordable Care Act does cover pregnancy benefits for young men. So, fear not! Jokes aside, however, pregnancy had better not be a young woman's experience, but that of the couple. Care, love, support, understanding, and—yes!—cooking is what guys get out of this experience. There is absolutely no good reason for a pregnant woman to follow the monastic diet, and I am certainly not aware of any Church rules that say otherwise. One thing that I always say to pregnant women is that they still have to fast. We all do! But their fast is eating as healthily as they can, which is a discipline in and of itself. If it is healthy—eat it; if it is not—do not eat it, even if it does not contain meat or dairy. This does not mean that a pregnant woman should stuff herself on meat at every meal. This would not be healthy, especially if we are talking about processed meats full of sodium and nitrates. But the season of pregnancy is not the time for only bread and water after vespers. To be sure, there are plenty of vegetarians who never eat meat—not even during pregnancy—and deliver healthy babies who also grow up not eating meat. One does not have to eat meat just because one is pregnant. But neither does one have to follow a monastic fast. Finally, most of us will grow old—40-or-so, or even older. This is a good season for a renewed focus on one's spiritual life. An older person may have more time for prayer, more opportunity for strict fasting. Certainly, the older people get, the more ailments they may have. But they will have those ailments whether or not they pray and fast. Watching television instead of praying, or eating hotdogs instead of fasting will not cure those ailments. In fact, it may add to them. Prayer and fasting, on the other hand, rejuvenate the soul and the body. In a recent study (2012), researchers at the National Institute of Aging in Baltimore discovered that strict fasting twice a week

helps lower the risk of developing many brain diseases, such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's, and delays aging in general. While this is not why we fast, it is still nice to know that fasting is really good for our physical body. Lack of self-control and self-discipline, on the other hand, is really bad at any age. All of this, of course, may be a long way away for some of us, or, at least, it may seem like it is a long way away. There is beauty and a tremendous spiritual benefit in living in the moment, in making today the day that counts, as if there were no tomorrow. But it is also important to "keep an eye on the ball" of our life, and to realize that what we sow today will have to be reaped tomorrow.