

## ON FASTING FOR DURING THE GREAT FAST Adapted from a presentation by Fr. Sergei Sveshnikov

A curious phenomenon can be observed in the interactions between pastors and their parishioners at the beginning of each major fast of the Church. Pastors attempt to call their parishioners' pious attention to the spiritual heights of fasting: the fighting against sin, the conquering of passions, the taming of the tongue, the cultivation of virtues. In turn, parishioners pester their pastors with purely dietary questions: when fish is allowed, whether soy milk or soy hotdogs are Lenten foods, whether adding milk to coffee is breaking the fast, or whether there is some dispensation that can be given to the young, the elderly, those who study, those who work, women, men, travelers, the sick, or those who simply do not feel well. In response to the overwhelming preoccupation with dietary rules to the detriment of the spiritual significance of fasting, some pastors, seemingly out of frustration, began to propose in sermons and internet articles that dietary rules are not important at all: if you want yogurt during Lent, just have some as long as you do not gossip; if you want a hamburger, then eat one, as long as you do not devour a fellow human being by judging and backstabbing. Unfortunately, such advice rarely helps eradicate gossip, judging or backstabbing. Rather, it seems to confuse people into thinking that since they have not yet conquered these and many other vices in their hearts, they do not have to fast from hamburger either. Thus, I would like us to discuss the very topic which fascinates so many lay people: what the fasting rules are and how they are to be followed by those of who have not taken the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. The Rules, the Rules, Let Us Be Attentive! So, what are the fasting rules? Most of us refer to a calendar we get at church to tell us what to eat and what not to eat on any given day. But where do the people who print the calendar get their information? Where does it really say how to fast? The fact is that fasting as we have come to know it nowadays is derived primarily from a monastic discipline, and fasting rules come from monasteries. For example, the rules used in the Russian Orthodox Church today, for example, largely come from the Monastery of Saint Sabbas near Jerusalem. There are several paragraphs in chapters 32 and 33 of the Monastery Typicon which outline the rules of fasting. The second source of fasting rules that can be identified is the tradition of the Great Church of Constantinople. This is how we get the mention of shellfish, which is found not in the Typicon but the Nomocanon. There are also some local variations—usually relaxing the fast—that have to do with either memories of saints or life in northern climates., where not too many vegetables grow year round, but fish is plentiful. Yet we do not live in these regions. And so, according to the strictest observance of the Typicon, on Monday and Tuesday of the first week of Great Lent, no food is allowed at all. On Wednesday of the first week, bread and warm (or cooked) vegetables are served once—and that is the only meal on that day. And those who cannot keep such a strict fast, such as the elderly, may eat some bread after sunset on Tuesday. The rest of Great Lent is less strict: some bread and vegetables are allowed once a day every day after vespers. And “if any monk destroys the holy Lent through his gluttony by eating fish on days other than the Feast of the Annunciation and Palm Sunday, may he not partake of Communion on Pascha.” That is the rule. That is not the common practice among Byzantine Catholics. Physiologically, it is quite feasible for an average human of average health to observe the strictest fasting rules for at least the first week of Lent as well as the Passion Week a month later. In fact, an average person can go completely without any food but only water for a week or so with no ill effects to his or her health—it is only a matter of will power. It is true that catabolic processes begin within 16-24 hours from the last meal, but unless one is in the business of growing meat on their bones—such as a bodybuilder—the effects would be minor. Averaging fewer than 500 calories a day for 49 days, however, or for 250-some days year after year—the approximate number of days we fast each year—may in fact have ill effects on the health of our parishioners—if not for the lack of calories, then for the lack of basic

nutrients. Does anyone actually follow these rules? I presume some do—probably some monastics and a very small number of lay people. But if you see a monk having breakfast or lunch on any weekday during Great Lent, you may assume that the said monk is modifying the rules somewhat to suit his particular needs or wants. In fact, most lay people and many monastics follow some modified version of the rule which is almost never a stricter version of the fast, but rather a relaxation of it—whether increasing the number of meals, or the amount of food, or the type of food, or all of the above. For example, at the Moscow Theological Academy and Seminary, located on the premises of the Holy-Trinity Sergius Lavra near Moscow, students and staff eat fish throughout Great Lent—not only on the two feast days mentioned in the Typicon. In recent years, fish is served twice a week on most weeks, but in the not-so-distant past, it was served as many as four times per week. Likewise, those who read the diary of Tsar-martyr Nicholas II will note that fish was served to the Royal Family throughout Great Lent. And this is not something that somehow started in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Patriarchal “Feeding Chronicle” of the 17th century, for example, recorded an abundance of fish dishes served to the Patriarch and his guests on every Saturday and Sunday during Great Lent. One question immediately arises: why do they need fish? Indeed, many Orthodox Christians follow the monastic rule and eat fish only on the feasts of the Annunciation and Palm Sunday—and they seem to do just fine. And I am not at all convinced that the seminary students would receive worse grades or have a more difficult time studying without fish. But it would seem that eating fish on all Saturdays and Sundays of Great Lent, while contrary to the monastic rule of Saint Sabbas, is well within the tradition and historical praxis of the Russian Church for both laymen and clergy alike. Of course, those who are both able and desirous to keep a stricter fast should be encouraged and guided toward the stricter discipline. But there seems to be something inherently wrong in an approach to fasting in which a vegan triple chocolate cake is somehow Lenten, but a can of tuna is not. The cake may indeed be “kosher” but it is hardly Lenten. We will return to this point.