

THE SPIRIT OF THE TYPICON

Many people seem to think that the Typicon forbids certain foods during Lent. They may, for example, assume that the Typicon forbids all animal products. This view is further advanced by clergy when we explain to our parishioners the basics of fasting. As shorthand, we may say that animal foods are not allowed during Lent, but all plant foods are allowed. This creates a Kosher-style approach to fasting, in which the fanciest vegan cakes and exquisite dark chocolates somehow become “Lenten.” Our pious Byzantine parishioners—much like pious Orthodox Jews—can be observed debating whether some ingredient is derived from an animal product and whether it is “kosher”—that is to say, Lenten. And much like in Kashrut, the focus shifts from the discipline of the body to the avoidance of certain ingredients for the sake of ritual purity. Fasting degrades into a religious vegan diet, in which some products become religiously unclean, while others are “kosher.” Now, it must be noted here that this approach to fasting may be the only reasonable way to greet a hierarch, should he visit your parish during Lent. Offering a guest bread, pickles and water after sunset may not be the best strategy, especially if the guest is your ruling bishop. And our sisterhoods work very hard to express their love for our archpastors in whatever ways they can, including culinary ways. This is perfectly normal, and these are reasonable exceptions. Of course, we all understand that the Typicon breathes very different air, an entirely different spirit. Not the spirit of slavery to the law of Kashrut, but a spirit of freedom from the desires of the flesh. Reading the Typicon, we may notice, contrary to popular belief, one very important thing: the Typicon does not contain any prohibition on any food. Unless we regard the remark about a monk “ruining” his Lent with fish as an indirect prohibition of fish, the Typicon actually does not prohibit any food or product whatsoever. The Typicon assumes that when we fast we do not eat or drink anything at all. I will repeat: Lent, according to the Typicon, is a complete abstinence from all food and drink. It treats Lent not as a religious diet, in which some foods are “kosher” while others are not, but as an exercise in asceticism. Thus, the Typicon does not have to forbid any food, since none is eaten, nor any drink, since none is drunk. Instead, it allows certain things at certain times to offer us sustenance. So, on Tuesday of the first week of Lent, the Typicon allows those who are weak to have some bread and water after vespers. On all other days until Passion Week, the Typicon allows bread, water, and warm vegetables once a day. On Saturdays and Sundays oil and wine are allowed. In other words, the Typicon thinks better of us than we think of ourselves—it does not address gluttons with prohibitions, rather it addresses strict ascetics with allowances. We must keep this in mind when applying fasting rules to ourselves: am I a glutton who needs prohibitions, or am I in danger of fasting too strictly for my own good and should heed the Typicon? When understood improperly, the fasting rules of the Typicon can produce such aberrations as arguments that vodka is a Lenten product since it is made from grains or potatoes and is thus not forbidden by the Typicon. True enough, the Typicon does not forbid vodka, and neither does it forbid beef steak, for that matter, as it simply does not forbid anything at all, as it assumes that we want to better ourselves in the freedom of the New Testament, rather than enslave ourselves to the dead stone tablets of the old Law.