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St. John the Baptist, Ottawa

Fasting: how less can be more

Fasting is defined as simply not eating or not eating or drinking. It is often seen as a religious observance, but, in fact, is not necessarily religious.

For example, when we go for certain X-rays we are told to fast from the evening before. The same for certain blood tests. There are also those who will fast for the sake of losing weight or to help detoxify their bodies.

Besides a fast in which we consume nothing, there are those who fast on liquids only or bread and water or juices only. When done for religious or health reasons or for reasons of vanity, there is a wide variety in just what is done.

Fasting can also be seen as a

symptom of some disorder; as, for example with anorexia.

Fasting is a universal practice and can be seen in the vision quest of the native peoples as well as a disciplinary and spiritual practice in all religions. The major religions tend to have specified ritual fasts, but those done for individual spiritual growth are also well known.

We are all familiar with the Islamic fast of Ramadhan when nothing may enter the mouth from sunrise to sunset for 30 consecutive days. After sunset all eating and drinking is permitted.

Hinduism & Buddhism have numerous fasts. Buddhist monks normally do not eat after about 11 A.M.

The fasts of the myriad Hindu cults are too numerous to mention, but Hindu asceticism tends to be extremely strict,

Judaism observes the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur each year as a strict fast day.

The Bible is full of examples of individuals who fasted for various reasons going right back to King Ahab, David, Moses, John the Baptist and his disciples and, of course, Jesus. Some of these fasts would last one, three or seven days. Others were 14 or 21 days and, of course, there is the traditional 40 day fast of Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Jesus. It should be noted that Adam sinned because he failed to fast.

In the Bible there are many reasons why people fast, among which we find: repentance and sorrow for sins, mourning. to draw close to the Lord, self discipline, upon the departure of the bridegroom. to keep a weaker brother from stumbling and for the power to exorcise spirits.

As Christians, we fast in imitation of Jesus Christ who followed the Jewish tradition of fasting twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays. Christians have kept this tradition, but have moved the dates to Wednesday and Friday as both these days are dedicated to the Holy Cross.

The other fast of Jesus recorded

in the gospel is the 40 days during which He fasted and prayed in the desert. It should be noted that Jesus Himself said that prayer and fasting are a means of exorcising particularly difficult spirits and that without prayer and fasting these spirits cannot be cast out.

At the end of His 40 day fast, Jesus encounters the Devil who tempts Him unsuccessfully.

Fasting, therefore, is seen as a very powerful means of doing battle with demons and, therefore, of fighting off temptation & thereby, avoiding sin.

The Lenten prayers of the Church

constantly associate fasting with the avoidance of sin.

The Church's tradition of fasting during Lent is quite demanding because the very first sin of disobedience, found its concrete expression in eating.

For Christians, fasting, especially during the Great Fast, is not an end in itself but is always linked to the other two traditional Lenten practices, namely prayer and almsgiving.

Among Christians, there has always been a bit of variety in the customs, but they also share a remarkable similarity because they are an imitation of Christ.

Unlike the Latins, who distinguish between fasting and abstinence, our tradition tends to speak of simply the fast - *nest-eia* or *pist*.

Traditionally for the Latins, abstinence means not eating meat and also until recently dairy products. Fasting for the Latins meant eating one meal a day which could be supplemented with two smaller meals which, together, did not add up to the amount of food in the main meal. There was no eating between meals.

In this tradition, it was possible to have fasting without abstinence and abstinence without fasting.

It is quite clear that the Latin tradition, until quite recently,

was quite similar to our own. The carneval = good bye meat - was a celebratory time before Lent when all remaining meat was consumed. We call it myasopusna Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday was a day to finish all dairy products - hence - the eating of crêpes, pancakes etc and anything which made use of milk, eggs, butter & cheese. We call it Syropusna.

It should be noted too that the Latins until not long ago had fasts for the Dormition, Sts. Peter and Paul and during Advent, although they were generally not as long or strict as ours. They also had Wednesdays and Fridays as days of abstinence.

In the East there are a few

variables, but yet a remarkable consistency.

Fasting tends to mean eating nothing, which is normally until vesper or sunset when certain types of food may be eaten. Among the Melkites it normally consists of eating and drinking nothing until noon and then following the usual restrictions.

From eating nothing we add various items. We start underground with potatoes, onions, garlic, radishes etc. & then go above ground and eat various kinds of fruits, nuts and vegetables. We get our protein from beans, lentils and tofu. The general rule is that we do not eat any warm blooded animals

or their products, hence the prohibition to eat dairy. One way of looking at this is that we avoid anything that contains or has come into contact with blood.

In the strict tradition fish, oil and wine are also included. The fish because they have a backbone, but other kinds of sea food such as mussels, shrimp, and oysters are permitted. The strict tradition applies to all the days of Lent although there is a mitigation for Saturday and Sunday when fish, oil, and wine are permitted.

An interesting aspect of Byzantine spirituality is that while we do not fast from the eucharist, we do have a liturgical fast

because we do not serve the divine liturgy on the weekdays of Lent except for the Annunciation.

Except for Saturdays and Sundays we receive communion on Wednesdays and Fridays at the liturgy of the presanctified gifts. This liturgy may actually be celebrated on all weekdays of Lent.

In addition to restricting the amount and kind of food we eat, the Great Fast also indicates no dancing, partying, rowdy entertainment or smoking during Lent.

Due to the close connection between body and soul, a serious fast can produce certain results. It tends to lower our metabolism which

causes us to be more withdrawn. This helps us ignore outside distractions and to concentrate much better. This slowing down also tends to withdraw us to varying degrees from the passions which lead us to sin. We tend to be interiorly more alert and need a bit less sleep.

In many ways fasting is a partial experience of the process of death. If we sense that we are dying we are much more likely to get serious about getting our priorities correct. We slowly lose interest in vain, superfluous and useless things and begin to concentrate more on lasting things of value - ~~namely~~ ^{namely} our spiritual life and eternal salvation.

In his pamphlet *Fasting and Science*