



## Fasting for Spiritual Strength

Fasting helps us come to *holiness* because it is a form of penance, and it develops strength of will and self-understanding. But holiness never comes automatically. We need a complete Christian discipline for life, and fasting is an important part of that. Fasting can have no supernatural results unless it is undertaken in a spirit of prayer. It often seems, to those who pray and fast, that God works small miracles for them. The person who fasts diligently and conscientiously can exercise an unprecedented control over his carnal appetites and desires. It is also essential that we fast for ourselves alone, and not compare ourselves with others who are not fasting. The great temptation of those who fast is *pride*.

“Fasting” is restricting our intake of food and drink, either completely or in part. The Maronite law of fasting is that we eat no food and take drink other than water, between midnight and noon.

“Abstinence” is excluding a certain type of food and drink from our diet between midnight and midnight (that is, for 24 hours), leaving us free to consume other foods and drinks. In our Maronite tradition, abstinence means not eating meat or dairy products, and, one would think it is not necessary to state that sweets and alcohol are also to be avoided.

Receiving the body and blood of Our Lord in the Eucharist is always permitted.

Food and water are always permitted when needed for medical reasons (e.g. to take medicines, or to prevent collapse or illness). Any person who does sometimes suffer when they fast should not take the risk: they should find another form of penance, decide upon it, and commit to it; e.g. donating money to the poor, visiting the sick, attending an extra Mass, saying the divine office, etc. So, if for example, if you can get migraines when you fast, do not fast. But you might, instead,

abstain throughout all of Lent, and find the minimum you need to eat in the morning and just take that, and perhaps a little more, rather than a full breakfast.

Only those between the ages of 14 and sixty are *bound* by the rules of *fasting*. Other than infants, all others, even children, are encouraged to *abstain*.

During Lent, we follow the example of the Lord who fasted for forty days (Matthew 4:2), and prophesied that we Christians would fast when He was no longer with us (Matt. 9:14-15; Luke 5:33-35). In Matt. 6:16-18, Our Lord taught us to fast for spiritual purposes only, and not to try to impress others with how good we might we feel we are.

In Australia, from 2017 inclusive, the rules of fasting and abstinence are:

- Fasting is obligatory on all weekdays from Ash Monday to Good Friday and also on the Saturday of Light (in 2017, this is from 27 February to 15 April).
- Abstinence is obligatory on each Friday of this period, plus in the first week of Lent and during the Week of Sufferings (which includes Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Saturday of Light).
- There is neither fasting nor abstinence on the feasts of St John Maroun (2 March), the Forty Martyrs (9 March), St Joseph (19 March), St Rafqa (23 March) and the Annunciation (25 March).

## Why Fast?

The main reasons we fast are *spiritual*. First, fasting is a powerful means of mortification. One feels in one's very body that one has struggled to make sincere atonement. When people feel that they have not done enough penance for a sin, let them fast 24, 36 or 48 hours, and they will know that they have performed their penance.

Second, fasting strengthens the will. Our Lord said that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41). Fasting helps the spirit to exercise its will over the flesh. It helps if the decision to fast is made a day or two before the fast commences. The body is more willing to accept it in when the decision has been made and the reasons set out beforehand.



Third, fasting facilitates self-examination, because under the influence of the fast we see ourselves quite differently. Our sense of ourselves is conditioned by how we eat and drink. Changing our intake of food and drink immediately upsets the established patterns of our reactions. We acquire new perceptions and feelings through the unaccustomed impression of depriving oneself of food and flavoured drink. This new knowledge of ourselves and what makes us tick helps us to make better confessions.

Many find that fasting brings a welcome sense of freedom, not only physically, but in the feeling and the mind, too. Our appetites enslave us more than we know, and being able to do without food helps us break this slavery. We often find, when we fast, that we don't need as much food as we thought we did. What we really crave is often not so much the food as the experience of satisfying our desire. Being a little hungry is not as bad as we might imagine: but the anticipation of eating something delightful can make fasting seem intolerable. Fasting shows us what a large part eating and even drooling over the prospect of eating play in our lives. When consumption is put into its proper place, there is more room in our minds and hearts for the spiritual life.

It should also be noted that the traditional understanding of the Church is that fasting from meat and dairy products is of help in overcoming the lust of the flesh. Further, substantial health benefits accrue from fasting, as long as one does not binge afterwards. Looking after

our health is good and legitimate, after all, our body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

St Maximos the Confessor tells us that: "Food was created for nourishment and healing. Those who eat food for purposes other than these two are therefore to be condemned as self-indulgent, because they misuse the gifts God has given us for our use. In all things, misuse is a sin." This is worth pondering, especially today as modern culture has tried to sensualise food and eating, and has, to a significant extent, succeeded for many people.

If food is fresh, nourishing and natural, then it will be satisfying to the taste as well. In fact, part of God's providential plan is just this: that even the simplest foods will delight us because of the good effects they have upon our bodies and our senses. A bad taste or a bad smell is usually a sign that food and drink is not good for us. For example, if milk has gone off, or meat has started to decay, it is actually repulsive. This is Mother Nature's sign reading: "Throw it out!" The words "disgusting" and "distasteful" literally mean "bad to digest" and "bad to taste".

There are some foods such as sumac, mustard, lemon and the vanilla bean, which can naturally impart a zest or a flavour to other foods. It is quite permissible to use these in our cooking. They also contain different nutriments. There is even some evidence that having a variety of foods can be good for us, as it seems to be a natural way of increasing the diversity and hence the robustness of the good bacteria which live inside our digestive system.

But to add things like sugar (especially sucrose and high fructose corn syrup), and flavoured salts and sweet sauces to our foods is first, to eat unnaturally (and one can doubt whether that is ever good), and second, to start to substitute the flavour of the condiment or addition for that of the food. Besides, the health dangers of sugar (not the naturally occurring lactose in milk and fructose in fruit) are well known: tooth decay and obesity, and contribution to cancer, kidney disease (especially through soft drinks), and even, it would appear, dementia.

As St Thalassios the Libyan taught: "To fast well is to enjoy simple food in small amounts and to shun other people's esteem".

*When we fast, it can help to take a patron saint. A good patron for fasting is the Lord Himself: Jesus of the Holy Silence. Jesus of the Holy Silence represents the balanced soul. His silence arises from His abstention from gluttony, lust and worldly desires and ambitions.*

*Jesus of the Holy Silence would speak when he needed to: He would not shake His head, point His finger, or do some acting to indicate that He was being silent.*

*We can follow His example. During Lent, it is particularly useful to contemplate refraining from speech in certain circumstances. One type of speech it is good to refrain from is bragging, and speaking in order to win other people's esteem. Related to this is running down other people in order to built myself up. Let us follow St Thalassios' advice this Lent, let us eat simple food in small amounts, and cease trying to win esteem.*