

# Lenten Fasting

A special word must be said about fasting during lent. Generally speaking, fasting is an essential element of the Christian Life. Christ fasted and taught men to fast. Blessed fasting is done in secret, without ostentation or accusation of others. (Matthew 6:16; Romans 14) It has as its goal the purification of our lives, the liberation of our souls and bodies from sin, the strengthening of our human powers of love for God and man, the enlightening of our entire being for communion with the Blessed Trinity.

The Orthodox rules for lenten fasting are the monastic rules. No meat is allowed after Meatfare Sunday and no eggs or dairy products after Cheesefare Sunday. These rules exist not as a Pharisaic "burden too hard to bear" (Luke 11:46), but as an ideal to be striven for; not as an end in themselves, but as a means to spiritual perfection crowned in love. The lenten services themselves continually remind us of this.

**Let us fast with a fast pleasing to the Lord. This is the true fast: the casting off of evil, the bridling of the tongue, the cutting off of anger, the cessation of lusts, evil talking, lies and cursing. The stopping of these is the fast true and acceptable. (Monday Vespers of the First Week)**

The lenten services also make the undeniable point that we should not pride ourselves with external fasting since the devil also never eats!

The ascetic fast of Great Lent continues from Meatfare Sunday to Easter Sunday, and is broken only after the Paschal Divine Liturgy. Knowing the great effort to which they are called, Christians should make every effort to fast as well as they can, in secret, so that God would see and bless them openly with a holy life. Each person must do his best in the light of the given ideal.

In addition to the ascetic fasting of the lenten season, the Orthodox alone among Christians also practice

what is known as **eucharistic** or **liturgical fasting**. This fasting does not refer to the normal abstinence in preparation for receiving the holy eucharist; it means fasting **from** the holy eucharist itself.

During the week days of Great Lent the regular eucharistic Divine Liturgy is not celebrated in Orthodox churches since the Divine Liturgy is always a paschal celebration of communion with the Risen Lord. Because the lenten season is one of preparation for the Lord's Resurrection through the remembrance of sin and separation from God, the liturgical order of the Church eliminates the eucharistic service on the week days of lent. Instead the non-eucharistic services are extended with additional scripture readings and hymnology of a lenten character. In order that the faithful would not be entirely deprived of Holy Communion on the lenten days, however, the **Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified Gifts** is celebrated on Wednesday and Friday evenings. (See below pp. 80)

Even during Great Lent, Saturday (the Sabbath Day) and Sunday (the Lord's Day) remain eucharistic days, and the Divine Liturgy is celebrated. On Saturdays it is the normal Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, usually with prayers for the dead. On Sundays it is the longer Liturgy of St. Basil the Great.

The well-known teaching that Saturdays and Sundays are never days of fasting in the Orthodox Church, an issue emphasized centuries ago when controversy arose with the Latin Church, refers only to this eucharistic-liturgical fast. During Great Lent, even though the **eucharistic fast is broken** on Saturdays and Sundays, the **ascetical fast continues** through the week-ends since this fasting is an extended effort made from Meatfare Sunday right to Easter itself.