

## Cheesefare Sunday



**TOMORROW IS THE FIRST DAY** of the Great Fast. As a reminder we hear once more these words of St Paul: “*You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep*” (Rom 13:11). Each year the Church calls to four fasting periods – four wake-up calls to focus more intently on the spiritual life in connection with one of its most important feasts. Since the Great Fast prepares us for Pascha, the “Feast of Feasts,” it is naturally more intense than the other fasting periods. Accordingly the Church sees St Paul’s admonition as especially appropriate today.

How do we observe this Fast? Again we take our cue from St Paul: “*Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires*” (Rom 13:12-14). In calling the people of his time to take up the challenges of the Gospel the apostle also gives us an outline of how to keep the Fast that is upon us. We are first of all to cast off the Works of Darkness, specifically the two examples which St Paul mentions.

### **Not in Reveling and Drunkenness**

Abstaining from entertainment is the first of St Paul’s examples which has become part of the Church’s Lenten fast. There is a hold on Church parties and celebrations (including marriages) for these forty days. Instead many parishes hold Lenten Dinners with proceeds devoted to charity.

In second-millennium Europe it was customary that theaters and all places of entertainment would be shuttered during the Fast. Religious plays and music on Biblical themes would be offered instead. Perhaps the most famous composition of this type, Handel’s *Messiah*, was premiered at a charity concert in Holy Week, April 1742.

In the past entertainment was, for most people, a relatively rare respite from work. Today it often seems that work is a respite from entertainment, which is available to us day and night at the click of a button. Many people cannot imagine doing without their TV or computer for forty days. Are we called to fast from these devices at least for part of the time during the Fast?

Abstinence from rich food and drink is the signature exercise of spiritual discipline during this period. The specific way this activity is practiced varies from eparchy to eparchy and even from individual to individual. These general principles are universal:

# TIME TO WAKE FROM SLEEP

**Fasting**, the abstinence from all food and drink, is observed prior to receiving the Eucharist and on every weekday (Monday through Friday) during the Great Fast, usually until noon.

**Abstinence** is the avoidance of specific foods. During the Great Fast abstinence from “meat” (i.e. all animal products, including poultry, fish, eggs, dairy) as well as wine and, in some traditions, oil is practiced daily for the forty days in most Eastern Churches. This is also the root of the Western practice of “giving up something for Lent.”

The Fast is a time for simplifying our physical life, but should it be seen as a time of “giving-up”? The Prodigal did not feel that he was giving something up when he set out for his father because he saw the reality of the life he was living. If we see fasting as “giving-up,” we may have forgotten the first lesson we learned in Sunday school: that the real aim of our life is communion with God.

### **Not in Quarreling and Jealousy**

As long as there has been a Great Fast there have been voices warning against misusing the experience. When we simply equate food fasting as the purpose of the season, St John Chrysostom tells us, we belittle the very season we seek to observe:

“Let the mouth fast from disgraceful and abusive words, because, what gain is there when, on the one hand we avoid eating chicken and fish and, on the other, we chew-up and consume our brothers? He who condemns and blasphemes is as if he has eaten brotherly meat, as if he has bitten into the flesh of his fellow man. It is because of this that Paul frightened us, saying: ‘If you chew up and consume one another be careful that you do not annihilate yourselves ...

“You did not thrust your teeth into the flesh (of your neighbor) but you thrust bad talk in his soul; you wounded it by spreading dishonor, causing inestimable damage both to yourself, to him, and to many others.”

The Prayer of St Ephrem the Syrian (“O Lord and Master of my life...”), which we recite so often during this season, leads us to see the purpose of the season as the acquisition of virtue, particularly in relation to others. We pray to avoid sloth, ambition, inquisitiveness, and vain talking as well the habit of judging others. We ask that we attain patience, love, and humility – virtues that define our relations with others as being in Christ.

Another Lenten experience which seeks to put relationships at the center of our focus during the Fast is the rite of forgiveness held at the end of vespers or the Liturgy on this day. We are enjoined to ask forgiveness and prayers

from every other person in the community. In some Churches it is the custom to sing the Paschalia during this rite, pointing toward the kiss we will exchange with everyone in the joy of Christ’s resurrection.

### **Put On the Lord Jesus Christ**

St Paul’s admonition – and the spirit of the Great Fast – does not exalt deprivation, or giving something up for its own sake. Both see abstinence as a way of making room for something greater: living a life of Christian love. Again, Paul is echoed by Chrysostom who writes, “Whoever limits the fast to the deprivation of food, he is the one who, in reality, abhors and ridicules the fast. Are you fasting? Show me your fast with your works. Which works? If you see someone who is poor, show him mercy. If you see an enemy, reconcile with him. If you see a friend who is becoming successful, do not be jealous of him! If you see a beautiful woman on the street, pass her by.” Thus almsgiving is as integral a part of this season as is fasting from food and drink.

St John Chrysostom offers us other helps in understanding the true purpose of this season when he writes: “If you cannot go without eating all day because of an ailment of the body, beloved one, no logical man will be able to criticize you for that. Besides, we have a Lord who is meek and loving (philanthropic) and who does not ask for anything beyond our power. Because he neither requires the abstinence from foods, neither that the Fast take place for the simple sake of fasting, neither is its aim that we remain with empty stomachs, but that we fast to offer our entire selves to the dedication of spiritual things, having distanced ourselves from secular things.

“If we regulated our life with a sober mind and directed all of our interest toward spiritual things, and if we ate as much as we needed to satisfy our necessary needs and offered our entire lives to good works, we would not have any need of the help rendered by the fast. But because human nature is indifferent and gives itself over mostly to comforts and gratifications, for this reason the philanthropic Lord, like a loving and caring father, devised the therapy of the fast for us, so that our gratifications would be completely stopped and that our worldly cares be transferred to spiritual works.”

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