

There are many books by leading Orthodox theologians and scholars on all aspects of the Orthodox Church and this leaflet series provides some basic information in the hope that it might prompt further enquiry.

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All text in these leaflets is mine except where indicated, therefore any errors of fact or in grammar are mine. I should be grateful to have those errors pointed out so that corrections can be made.

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**"The Orthodox Church.....**has preserved unadulterated the first and most ancient ecclesiastical tradition and teaching, has avoided innovations and personal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and dogmas of the faith, and is administered according to the ancient synodical system under local bishops in collaboration with the faithful and successive groups of both local and broader Episcopal synods, of which the highest is the Ecumenical Synod, that of the Orthodox worldwide. The basic administrative canons, the details of which are regulated according to local needs, have been determined by the seven ecumenical synods. The Church is not managed by regional states in which it resides, although it collaborates in good works when asked to do so.

Within the entire Orthodox Church there is absolute cooperation in goodwill and mutual respect. Perchance minor human problems are addressed successfully through the application of the evangelical spirit."

*Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, from "Encountering the Mystery."*  
ISBN 978-0-385-51813-0

Orthodox Community of Archangel Michael and Holy Piran, Cornwall.  
[www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk](http://www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk)

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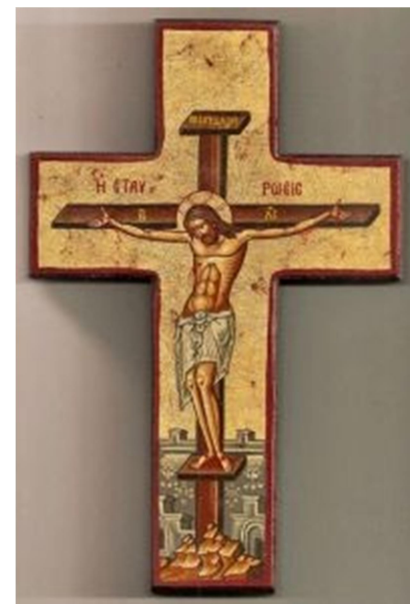
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Agia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Constantinople

Fr.N.03/15

# Introduction to Orthodox Christianity: Fasting



If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me  
Matt 16:24

"Self-denial is for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, for a better life; it is not a punitive end in itself."

At first glance the pattern (rules) of **fasting** in the Orthodox Church may appear a little daunting and the purpose unclear. However fasting, that is abstaining from certain foods and at prescribed times, is beneficial through the discipline it requires and from which spiritual growth and physical wellbeing can be achieved, Orthodoxy having always regarded man as a unity of soul and body.

We read of fasting in the Old Testament with numerous references to the practice in the New Testament and in the life of the new and growing early Christian communities.

Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2). He instructed his disciples on the right disposition when fasting (Matthew 6:16). The Apostles fasted (Acts 13:2). The Holy Apostle Paul refers to fasting (2 Corinthians 11:27). The practice is confirmed and instructions given in the early Christian work called the "Didache" (teaching) possibly from the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

It should then come as no surprise to learn that following the example of Christ, his Apostles and the early Church, this was and is continued today in the life of Orthodox Christians with the ancient and some developed ways observed.

Jesus warned his disciples that this act of self denial should not be accompanied by any form of outward show or self righteousness. Similarly whilst advocating and encouraging this beneficial devotional practice there is no judgemental attitude between fellow Orthodox and the food hospitality of non-Orthodox is not treated with disrespect.

Also, from the early church Fathers there are writings deriving from scriptural imperatives which point to the place of food fasting within a wider more comprehensive fast. In the third column is one such passage from St. John Chrysostom.

Growing into the pattern of personal fasting can be discussed with Parish Priest, Spiritual Father or Mother. Prescribed fasting periods noted below may be the ideal to pursue but it should be noted that in the case of infancy, illness, medical condition or old age, these rules may sensibly be relaxed or dispensations given. Even within the fasting periods will be found days when the fast is reduced.

**When all relaxations and dispensations are taken into account, it remains true that Orthodox Christians in the twentieth century – laymen as well as monks – fast with a severity for which there is no parallel in western Christendom, except perhaps in the strictest Religious Orders.**

Metropolitan Kallistos "The Orthodox Church."

#### **Chief fasting times:**

**Each Wednesday**, in memory of the betrayal of Christ.

**Each Friday**, in memory of the crucifixion of Christ.

**The Nativity (Christmas) Fast** – 40 days from November 15<sup>th</sup> to December 24<sup>th</sup>.

**The Great 40 days Fast (Lent) and Holy Week** – this begins seven weeks before Pascha (Easter).

**The Apostles Fast** – this varies in time but precedes the Feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29<sup>th</sup>.

**The Dormition Fast** – from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> of August before the Feast of the Falling Asleep of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Brief fasts also occur at other times and these can be found by consulting an Orthodox calendar or seeking advice.

The fast **before** receiving the **Holy Gifts** in **Communion** at the Divine Liturgy is at least from mid-night unless having a dispensation for reasons noted above.

What does **fasting/abstaining** involve? In simplest terms: not eating meat products, dairy foods, fish, poultry or eggs, i.e., all animal derivatives; nor drinking alcohol.

#### **St. John Chrysostomos on Fasting.**

**The value of fasting consists not in abstinence only from food, but in a relinquishment of sinful practices, since he who limits his fasting only to an abstinence from meat is he who especially disparages it. Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend enjoying honour, do not envy him. For let not the mouth only fast, but also the eye, and the ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast by being pure from avarice. Let the feet fast by ceasing to run to forbidden spectacles. Let the eyes fast by being taught never to fix themselves rudely upon handsome countenances. For looking is the food of the eyes, but if it be unlawful or forbidden it mars the fast and overturns the safety of the soul; but if it be lawful and safe, it adorns fasting. For it would be an instance of the highest absurdity to abstain from meats and from unlawful foods but with the eyes to feed on what is forbidden. Do you not eat flesh? Do not feed on licentiousness by means of the eyes. Let the ear fast also. The fasting of the ear is not to receive evil speaking and calumnies. 'You shall not receive an idle report,' it says. Let also your mouth fast from foul words. For what does it profit if we abstain from birds and fish, and yet bite and devour our brethren?**

*Lenten Homily.*