

Byzantine Rite  
**LENTEN REGULATIONS**

**STRICT ABSTINENCE**—is to be observed on the FIRST DAY OF LENT and on GOOD FRIDAY.

The law of **strict abstinence** forbids the use of meat, eggs, and dairy products.

The law of **strict abstinence** binds those who have completed their 21st year through their 59th year.

**ABSTINENCE**—is to be observed on every Friday during Lent.

The law of **abstinence** forbids the use of meat.



**PRAYER OF ST. EPHRAEM**

O Lord and Master of my life, keep away from me the spirit of discouragement, negligence, desire for power and idle talk; (prostration)

Grant me, Your servant, the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and charity; (prostration)

Yea, my Lord and King, grant me the ability to see my own sins, and not to judge my brother, for You are blessed forever and ever, Amen. (prostration)



"Since we were wounded by sin, we must treat it with penance. But penance without fast is worthless. Then by fasting justify yourselves before God!"

—St. Basil, *Hom. on Fast I*, 3

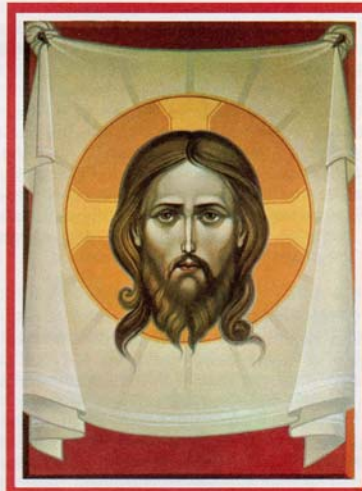


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**THE GREAT  
FORTY DAYS FAST**



**THE GREAT LENT**  
A  
**TRADITIONAL CUSTOM**  
OF THE  
**BYZANTINE RITE**

**THE GREAT FAST**  
or the  
**FORTY DAYS FAST**

Fast is one of the oldest and most venerable practices in the Church which came to us through an "interrupted tradition." (St. Basil, *Hom. on Fast I*, 5) We have various days and seasons of Fast in the Byzantine Rite but, in this pamphlet, we will limit our presentation to the pre-Paschal Fast known as the *Great Fast*. It is called the *Great Fast* not only on account of its duration (seven weeks) but mainly on account of its importance for the spiritual renewal of the faithful. In the Old Slavonic, the *Great Fast* is called "*Svjata Chetyredesjatnica*," meaning the *Holy Forty Days* while in English, it is called *Lent* from the Anglo-Saxon *Lencten*, meaning spring. The *Great Fast* can be described as a forty-day period of prayer, penance, and spiritual exercises in preparation for the proper celebration of Easter.

1.

The Great Fast, as we know it today, is the result of a most complicated historical development, not all stages of which have been, so far, sufficiently explained. It seems that in the second century, the Church knew only a very short fast (a day or two) before the Pasch. During the third century, the pre-paschal fast was extended to the entire week known to us as the *Passion* or *Holy Week*. (cf. *Didascalia XXI*, 24) The first mention of the *Forty Days Fast* is made in the fifth canon of the Council of Nicaea (325). From that time, the *Forty Days Fast* is discussed by many Church Fathers and St. Athanasius (d. 373) does not hesitate to say: "Anyone who neglects to observe the *Forty Days Fast* is not worthy to celebrate the Easter Festival." (cf. *Festal Letters XIX*, 9)

The Synod of Laodicea (about 360) imposed the strict obligation of fasting for forty days before Easter for the first time. By the end of the fourth century, the *Great Fast*, known to the Greeks as the "*Tessaracoste*" (Forty Days) and to the Romans as "*Quadragesima*," was generally observed by the entire Church.

2.

Historically, we trace the institution of the *Great Fast* to the fourth century but it is impossible to determine *when*, *where*, and *why* this venerable practice was established. Its origin must be sought in connection with the institution of the *catechumenate*.

The primitive Church, having established Easter as a solemn day of Baptism, submitted the candidates (catechumens) to an intensive spiritual training during the pre-paschal period. To encourage them, the sponsors, relatives, and friends of the catechumens gradually began to take part in their daily exercises, as witnessed by St. Justin Martyr: "Those who believe in the truth of our teaching, first of all, promise to live according to that teaching. Then we teach them how to pray and entreat God with *fasting* for the remission of their sins; and we (the faithful) pray and fast with them, too." (cf. *I Apology*, 61)

Moses (Ex. 24, 18; 34, 28) and after him Elijah (I Kg. 19, 8) prepared themselves to meet the Lord with prayer and fasting for forty days. In imitation of them, the training of catechumens was also extended to forty days, as witnessed by Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339): "We submit ourselves to the forty days exercise as a preparation for the Easter Festival in imitation of SS. Moses and Elijah." (cf. *Pasch. Solemn*. 4)

A decisive influence on the institution of the pre-paschal fast was the example of our Savior Who spent forty days fasting in the desert (Mt. 4, 1-11) as suggested by the fourth century document: "The forty-days fast is to be observed as a memorial of Our Lord's way of life and His legislation." (cf. *Apost. Const.* V, 13)

3.

Originally, the forty day period was computed from Good Friday, the day the *Pasch of Crucifixion* was celebrated, and then extended to six weeks. In Constantinople, when they transferred the solemn Baptism from Easter to the Saturday of Lazarus, the Lenten season of preparation also had to be anticipated by one week. Thus, according to the Byzan-

tine practice, the Great Fast began seven weeks before Easter and ended on the Friday before the Saturday of Lazarus. At the Vespers of Lazarus we sing: "We have concluded the beneficial *Forty Days* (Lent) and we implore You, O Lover of Mankind, make us see the Holy Week of Your Passion and praise Your work (of redemption)." Liturgically, then, our *Great Fast* ends on the Friday before the Saturday of Lazarus and is exactly forty days long.

*Holy Week*, in the Byzantine Rite, is considered as a "special week" and, strictly speaking, is not included in the Forty-Days Fast as St. John Chrysostom indicates: "At last we have arrived at the end of the *Holy Forty Days* and, with the help of God, we reached this *Great (Holy) Week*. Why do we call this week *Great*? Because of the great and indescribable benefits that have befallen us during this week." (cf. *Hom. on Gen. XXX, 1*)

In the Roman Rite, Holy Week was included into the Lenten season and the Lenten season was of six week duration. But later, when the Sundays in Lent were exempt from fasting in the West, Lent became only thirty-six days long. This situation was remedied in the seventh century by adding four more days of fasting at the beginning of the Lenten season with the first day of Lent on Ash Wednesday. This is the reason for the difference in the first day of Lent between the Byzantine Rite and the Roman Rite.

4.

According to Byzantine tradition, the Lenten discipline consists of three separate parts; 1. *Corporal or External Fast*, including the abstinence from certain foods, drink and amusements; 2. *Spiritual or Internal Fast* which consists of abstinence from "all evil"—sin; 3. *Spiritual Renewal* achieved by the practice of the virtues and good works.

*Corporal Fast*, also called ascetical fast, developed mostly under the influence of monastic discipline and became very rigid, as described by St. Theodore Studite (d. 826): "During the Great Fast, we eat only once at about the ninth hour (i.e. 3:00 P.M.) taking only dry food and vegetables without oil; we do not drink wine, either, except on Saturday and Sunday, when we are also permitted to eat fish.

During the *Great (Holy) Week* we observe, as much as possible, a complete fast without wine and oil until (Holy) Saturday night." (cf. Chron. Catech. 9)

St. Theodore, who followed a moderate monastic discipline, gives the following advice: "Concerning the quantity and quality of food, you should fast as much as your body can endure." (cf. *Epistolary*, 1. II, ep. 135) The same principal should be applied today since our Lenten Regulations prescribe only a token of fasting.

In order to create a prayerful atmosphere during Lent, the Fathers insisted on a complete abstinence from all kinds of amusements, i.e. music, dances, parties during Lent (cf. *Hom. Against Drunks*, 1-2) and St. John Chrysostom chastised those who during the Great Fast "dared to attend horse-races." (cf. *Hom. on Gen. VI, 1*) This point of fast should be stressed today with the mania of entertainment besetting our younger generations.

5.

*Spiritual or Internal Fast*, which is the abstinence from all evil—especially from serious sin—is the most essential part of fast. St. John Chrysostom taught that the "value of fasting consists not so much in abstinence from food but rather in withdrawal from sinful practices." (cf. *Hom. on Statutes III, 11*) St. Basil the Great explains: "Turning away from all wickedness means keeping our tongue in check, restraining our anger, suppressing evil desires, and avoiding all gossip, lying and swearing. To abstain from these things—herein lies the true value of fast!" (cf. *Hom. on Fast II, 7*) This is harmony with the Prophet's cry: "Return from your evil ways and reform your bad deeds!" (Jer. 18, 11) Hence St. John Chrysostom decries the folly of those Christians who "abstain all day long from food but fail to abstain from sin." (cf. *Hom. on Gen. VI, 6*)

We are all sinners and "if we say that we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves." (I Jn. 1, 8) Divine law prescribes that we do penance, for "unless we repent we shall all perish." (Lk. 13, 3) Lent was always a special season of repentance and penitential practices by which Christians sought reconciliation with God and expiation for their sins.

It was a time set aside for a worthy fulfillment of one's Easter duty, as explained by St. John Chrysostom:

"In ancient times, many Christians received the Holy Mysteries (Communion) at random and without discrimination, especially on the day of their institution (i.e. Holy Thursday). Seeing the great harm that comes from the careless reception of Communion, the Fathers have set aside forty days (of Lent) for prayer, listening to God's word, and attending services in order that, after proper purification of our heart by prayer, fasting, almsgiving, night-vigils and confession, we may receive Holy Communion with a clear conscience as many times as possible." (cf. *Hom. against Jews III, 4*)

6.

*Spiritual Renewal*, with the practice of the virtues and doing good works, must be the main objective of our fasting as suggested by St. Basil in his homily on fasting: "Accept fast as an experienced educator by whom the Church teaches us piety." (cf. *Hom. on Fast II, 3*)

The Fathers of the Church insisted that during Lent the faithful attend the Lenten church services which were enriched with moving liturgical hymns, penitential prayers and prostrations. One such penitential prayer with prostrations, ascribed to St. Ephraem (d. 373), is still used in our churches today. (cf. Back Cover) Special Lenten sermons were preached every night during Lent (cf. St. Chrysostom, *Hom on Gen. XI, 3*) exhorting the faithful to "die to sin and to live to God in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 6, 11)

To live "*in Christ*" also meant frequent Holy Communion. St. John Chrysostom encouraged his people to receive Holy Communion "as many times as possible" (cf. *Hom. against Jews III, 4*) and St. Basil recommended daily Communion as a "most beneficial practice." (cf. Ep. 93)

To give the faithful the opportunity to receive Holy Communion every day of Lent, even on the aliturgical days, the Fathers introduced the Liturgy of the

Presanctified Gifts. (cf. *Council of Trullo*, can. 52) This Liturgy also fostered all-day fasting since it was celebrated late in the day (after 3:00 P.M.) and the faithful had to keep the "*Eucharistic fast*" to receive Communion.

In recent centuries, unfortunately, a true renewal of Christian life was replaced by a formal "fulfillment of the Easter Duty" without stressing a sincere "change of heart" (Gr. *metanoia*, used for repentance) and the practice of penitential works. And yet we must admit, with St. John Chrysostom, that "Fast has no advantage to us unless it brings about our spiritual renewal." (cf. *Hom. on Gen. XI, 3*)

7.

In the course of the centuries, our fasting discipline has undergone numerous and radical changes. The observance of the *Holy Forty Days* (Lent) is but a mere formalism, reduced to abstinence on certain days and without any stress on one's spiritual renewal or the amending of one's life. It is urgent that we return to the pristine spirit of the Great Fast as advised by the great Doctor of the Church, St. John Chrysostom: "It is necessary that, while fasting, we change our whole life and practice virtue." (cf. *Hom. on Statues III, 19*) It is in this spirit that the Church, in recent years, has considerably relaxed the external aspects of fast, hoping that the faithful would correct their misconception of the spirit of Lent and devote more attention to the practice of the virtues and in doing good works. (cf. Pope Paul VI, *Apost. Const. "Repent."* Feb. 17, 1966. This same spirit of Lent was stressed by St. Theodore Studite in the ninth century in his *Epistolary*: "While fasting, let us purify our hearts, sanctify our souls, and trample down all vices." (cf. *Epistolary*, 1. II, ep. 147)

A return to the true spirit of fasting is urgently needed in today's world. It is urgently needed to help us recover that vision of the New Life which we, in our secularistic world, so often betray and so easily lose.