

# THE MEANING OF THE GREAT FAST: The True Nature of Fasting — Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

## THE TRUE NATURE OF FASTING

'We waited, and at last our expectations were fulfilled', writes the Serbian Bishop Nikolai of Ochrid, describing the Easter service at Jerusalem. 'When the Patriarch sang "Christ is risen", a heavy burden fell from our souls. We felt as if we also had been raised from the dead. All at once, from all around, the same cry resounded like the noise of many waters. "Christ is risen" sang the Greeks, the Russians, the Arabs, the Serbs, the Copts, the Armenians, the Ethiopians one after another, each in his own tongue, in his own melody. . . . Coming out from the service at dawn, we began to regard everything in the light of the glory of Christ's Resurrection, and all appeared different from what it had yesterday; everything seemed better, more expressive, more glorious. Only in the light of the Resurrection does life receive meaning.'<sup>1</sup>

This sense of resurrection joy, so vividly described by Bishop Nikolai, forms the foundation of all the worship of the Orthodox Church; it is the one and only basis for our Christian life and hope. Yet, in order for us to experience the full power of this Paschal rejoicing, each of us needs to pass through a time of preparation. '*We waited*,' says Bishop Nikolai, 'and at last our expectations were fulfilled.' Without this waiting, without this expectant preparation, the deeper meaning of the Easter celebration will be lost.

So it is that before the festival of Easter there has developed a long preparatory season of repentance and fasting, extending in present Orthodox usage over ten weeks. First come twenty-two days (four successive Sundays) of preliminary observance; then the six weeks or forty days of the Great Fast of Lent; and finally Holy Week, Balancing the seven weeks of Lent and Holy Week, there follows after Easter a corresponding season of fifty days of thanksgiving, concluding with Pentecost.

Each of these seasons has its own liturgical book. For the time of preparation there is the Lenten Triodion or 'Book of Three Odes', the most important parts of which are here presented in English translation. For the time of thanksgiving there is the Pentekostarion, also known in Slav usage as the Festal Triodion.<sup>2</sup> The point of division between the two books is midnight on the evening of Holy Saturday, with Matins for Easter Sunday as the first service in the Pentekostarion. This division into two distinct volumes, made for reasons of practical convenience, should not cause us to overlook the essential unity between the Lord's Crucifixion and His Resurrection, which together form a single, indivisible action. And just as the Crucifixion and the Resurrection are one action, so also

the 'three holy days' (*triduum sanctum*) - Great Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday constitute a single liturgical observance. Indeed, the division of the Lenten Triodion and the Pentekostarion into two books did not become standard until after the eleventh century; in early manuscripts they are both contained in the same codex.

What do we find, then, in this book of preparation that we term the Lenten Triodion? It can most briefly be described as *the book of the fast*. Just as the children of Israel ate the 'bread of affliction' (Deut. 16: 3) in preparation for the Passover, so Christians prepare themselves for the celebration of the New Passover by observing a fast. But what is meant by this word 'fast' (*nisteia*)? Here the utmost care is needed, so as to preserve a proper balance between the outward and the inward. On the outward level fasting involves physical abstinence from food and drink, and without such exterior abstinence a full and true fast cannot be kept; yet the rules about eating and drinking must never be treated as an end in themselves, for ascetic fasting has always an inward and unseen purpose. Man is a unity of body and soul, a living creature fashioned from natures visible and invisible', in the words of the Triodion; <sup>3</sup> and our ascetic fasting should therefore involve both these natures at once. The tendency to over-emphasize external rules about food in a legalistic way, and the opposite tendency to scorn these rules as outdated and unnecessary, are both alike to be deplored as a betrayal of true Orthodoxy. In both cases the proper balance between the outward and the inward has been impaired.

The second tendency is doubtless the more prevalent in our own day, especially in the West. Until the fourteenth century, most Western Christians, in common with their brethren in the Orthodox East, abstained during Lent not only from meat but from animal products, such as , eggs, milk, butter and cheese. In East and West alike, the Lenten fast involved a severe physical effort. But in Western Christendom over the past five hundred years, the physical requirements of fasting have been steadily reduced, until by now they are little more than symbolic. How many, one wonders, of those who eat pancakes on Shrove Tuesday are aware of the original reason for this custom to use up any remaining eggs and butter before the Lenten fast begins? Exposed as it is to Western secularism, the Orthodox world in our own time is also beginning to follow the same path of laxity.

One reason for this decline in fasting is surely a heretical attitude towards human nature, a false 'spiritualism' which rejects or ignores the body, viewing man solely in terms of his reasoning brain. As a result, many contemporary Christians have lost a true vision of man as an integral unity of the visible and the invisible; they neglect the positive role played by the body in the spiritual life, forgetting St. Paul's affirmation: 'Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. . . . glorify God with your body' (I Cor. 6: 19-20). Another reason for the decline in fasting among Orthodox is the argument, commonly advanced in our times, that

the traditional rules are no longer possible today. These rules presuppose, so it is urged, a closely organized, non-pluralistic Christian society, following an agricultural way of life that is now increasingly a thing of the past. There is a measure of truth in this. But it needs also to be said that fasting, as traditionally practiced in the Church, has *always* been difficult and has *always* involved hardship. Many of our contemporaries are willing to fast for reasons of health or beauty, in order to lose weight; cannot we Christians do as much for the sake of the heavenly Kingdom? Why should the self-denial gladly accepted by previous generations of Orthodox prove such an intolerable burden to their successors today? Once St. Seraphim of Sarov was asked why the miracles of grace, so abundantly manifest in the past, were no longer apparent in his own day, and to this he replied: 'Only one thing is lacking - a firm resolve'. <sup>4</sup>

The primary aim of fasting is to make us *conscious of our dependence upon God*. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food - particularly in the opening days - involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do nothing' (John 15: 5). If we always take our fill of food and drink, we easily grow over-confident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The observance of a physical fast undermines this sinful complacency. Stripping from us the specious assurance of the Pharisee - who fasted, it is true, but not in the right spirit - Lenten abstinence gives us the saving self dissatisfaction of the Publican (Luke 18: 10-13). Such is the function of the hunger and the tiredness: to make us 'poor in spirit', aware of our helplessness and of our dependence on God's aid.

Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element of weariness and hunger. Abstinence leads, not merely to this, but also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. Even if the fast proves debilitating at first, afterwards we find that it enables us to sleep less, to think more clearly, and to work more decisively. As many doctors acknowledge, periodical fasts contribute to bodily hygiene. While involving genuine self-denial, fasting does not seek to do violence to our body but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Most of us in the Western world habitually eat more than we need. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excessive weight and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.

It will be noted that in common Orthodox usage the words 'fasting' and 'abstinence' are employed interchangeably. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church made a clear distinction between the two terms: abstinence concerned the types

of food eaten, irrespective of quantity, whereas fasting signified a limitation on the number of meals or on the amount of food that could be taken. Thus on certain days both abstinence and fasting were required; alternatively, the one might be prescribed but not the other. In the Orthodox Church a clear-cut distinction is not made between the two words. During Lent there is frequently a limitation on the number of meals eaten each day, <sup>5</sup> but when a meal is permitted there is no restriction on the amount of food allowed. The Fathers simply state, as a guiding principle, that we should never eat to satiety but always rise from the table feeling that we could have taken more and that we are now ready for prayer.

If it is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting, it is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting is not a mere matter of diet. It is moral as well as physical. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal to our Father's house. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means 'abstinence not only from food but from sins'. 'The fast', he insists, 'should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body': the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice. <sup>6</sup> It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: 'You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother' . <sup>7</sup> The same point is made in the Triodion, especially during the first week of Lent:

As we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. . .

Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord.

True fasting is to put away all evil,

To control the tongue, to forbear from anger,

To abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury.

If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God.

Let us keep the Fast not only by refraining from food,

But by becoming strangers to all the bodily passions. <sup>8</sup>

The inner significance of fasting is best summed up in the triad: *prayer, fasting, almsgiving*. Divorced from prayer and from the reception of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. It leads, not to contrition and joyfulness, but to pride, inward tension and irritability. The link between prayer and fasting is rightly indicated by Father Alexander Elchaninov. A critic of fasting says to him: 'Our work suffers and we become irritable. . . . I have never seen servants [in pre-revolutionary Russia] so bad tempered as during the last days of

Holy Week. Clearly, fasting has a very bad effect on the nerves.' To this Father Alexander replies: 'You are quite right. . . . If it is not accompanied by prayer and an increased spiritual life, it merely leads to a heightened state of irritability. It is natural that servants who took their fasting seriously and who were forced to work hard during Lent, while not being allowed to go to church, were angry and irritable.'<sup>9</sup>

Fasting, then, is valueless or even harmful when not combined with prayer. In the Gospels the devil is cast out, not by fasting alone, but by 'prayer and fasting' (Matt. 17: 21 ; Mark 9: 29); and of the early Christians it is said, not simply that they fasted, but that they 'fasted and prayed' (Acts 13: 3; compare 14: 23). In both the Old and the New Testament fasting is seen, not as an end in itself, but as an aid to more intense and living prayer, as a preparation for decisive action or for direct encounter with God. Thus our Lord's forty-day fast in the wilderness was the immediate preparation for His public ministry (Matt. 4: 1-11). When Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34: 28) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (3 [1] Kgs. 19: 8-12), the fast was in both cases linked with a theophany. The same connection between fasting and the vision of God is evident in the case of St. Peter (Acts 10: 9-17). He 'went up on the housetop to pray about the sixth hour, and he became very hungry and wanted to eat; and it was in this state that he fell into a trance and heard the divine voice. Such is always the purpose of ascetic fasting - to enable us, as the Triodion puts it, to 'draw near to the mountain of prayer'.<sup>10</sup>

Prayer and fasting should in their turn be accompanied by almsgiving - by love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness. Eight days before the opening of the Lenten fast, on the Sunday of the Last Judgment, the appointed Gospel is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25': 31-46), reminding us that the criterion in the coming judgment will not be the strictness of our fasting but the amount of help that we have given to those in need. In the words of the Triodion:

Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let this be our way of life:

Let us feed the hungry, let us give the thirsty drink,

Let us clothe the naked, let us welcome strangers,

Let us visit those in prison and the sick.

Then the Judge of all the earth will say even to us:

'Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.'<sup>11</sup>

This stanza, it may be noted in passing, is a typical instance of the 'evangelical' character of the Orthodox service-books. In common with so many other texts in the Triodion, it is simply a paraphrase of the words of Holy Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

It is no coincidence that on the very threshold of the Great Fast, at Vespers on the Sunday

of Forgiveness, there is a special ceremony of mutual reconciliation: <sup>13</sup> for without love towards others there can be no genuine fast. And this love for others should not be limited to formal gestures or to sentimental feelings, but should issue in specific acts of almsgiving. Such was the firm conviction of the early Church. The second-century *Shepherd of Hermas* insists that the money saved through fasting is to be given to the widow, the orphan and the poor. <sup>14</sup> But almsgiving means more than this. It is to give not only our money but our time, not only what we have but what we are; it is to give a part of ourselves. When we hear the Triodion speak of almsgiving, the word should almost always be taken in this deeper sense. For the mere giving of money can often be a substitute and an evasion, a way of protecting ourselves from closer personal involvement with those in distress. On the other hand, to do nothing more than offer reassuring words of advice to someone crushed by urgent material anxieties is equally an evasion of our responsibilities (see Jas. 2: 16). Bearing in mind the unity already emphasized between man's body and his soul, we seek to offer help on both the material and the spiritual levels at once.

'When thou seest the naked, cover him; and hide not thyself from thine own flesh.' The Eastern liturgical tradition, in common with that of the West, treats Isaiah 58: 3-8 as a basic Lenten text. So we read in the Triodion:

While fasting with the body, brethren, let us also fast in spirit.

Let us loose every bond of iniquity;

Let us undo the knots of every contract made by violence;

Let us tear up all unjust agreements;

Let us give bread to the hungry

And welcome to our house the poor who have no roof to cover them,

That we may receive great mercy from Christ our God. <sup>15</sup>

Always in our acts of abstinence we should keep in mind St. Paul's admonition not to condemn others who fast less strictly: 'Let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats' (Rom. 14: 3). Equally, we remember Christ's condemnation of outward display in prayer, fasting or almsgiving (Matt. 6: 1-18). Both these Scriptural passages are often recalled in the Triodion:

Consider well, my soul: dost thou fast? Then despise not thy neighbor.

Dost thou abstain from food? Condemn not thy brother.

Come, let us cleanse ourselves by almsgiving and acts of mercy to the poor,

Not sounding a trumpet or making a show of our charity.

Let not our left hand know what our right hand is doing;

Let not vainglory scatter the fruit of our almsgiving;

But in secret let us call on Him that knows all secrets:

Father, forgive us our trespasses, for Thou lovest mankind. [16](#)

If we are to understand correctly the text of the Triodion and the spirituality that underlies it, there are five misconceptions about the Lenten fast against which we should guard. In the first place, the Lenten fast is not intended only for monks and nuns, but is *enjoined on the whole Christian people*. Nowhere do the Canons of the Ecumenical or Local Councils suggest that fasting is only for monks and not for the laity. By virtue of their Baptism, all Christians - whether married or under monastic vows - are Cross-bearers, following the same spiritual path. The exterior conditions in which they live out their Christianity display a wide variety, but in its inward essence the life is one. Just as the monk by his voluntary self-denial is seeking to affirm the intrinsic goodness and beauty of God's creation, so also is each married Christian required to be in some measure an ascetic. The way of negation and the way of affirmation are interdependent, and every Christian is called to follow both ways at once.

In the second place, the Triodion *should not be misconstrued in a Pelagian sense*. If the Lenten texts are continually urging us to greater personal efforts, this should not be taken as implying that our progress depends solely upon the exertion of our own will. On the contrary, whatever we achieve in the Lenten fast is to be regarded as a free gift of grace from God. The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete leaves no doubt at all on this point:

I have no tears, no repentance, no compunction;

But as God do Thou Thyself, O Saviour, bestow them on me. [17](#)

In the third place, our fasting *should not be self-willed but obedient*. When we fast, we should not try to invent special rules for ourselves, but we should follow as faithfully as possible the accepted pattern set before us by Holy Tradition. This accepted pattern, expressing as it does the collective conscience of the People of God, possesses a hidden wisdom and balance not to be found in ingenious austerities devised by our own fantasy. Where it seems that the traditional regulations are not applicable to our personal situation, we should seek the counsel of our spiritual father - not in order legalistically to secure a 'dispensation' from him, but in order humbly with his help to discover what is the will of God for us. Above all, if we desire for ourselves not some relaxation but some piece of additional strictness, we should not embark upon it without our spiritual father's blessing. Such has been the practice since the early centuries of the Church's life:

Abba Antony said: 'I know of monks who fell after much labor and lapsed into madness, because they trusted in their own work and neglected the commandment that says: "Ask

your father, and he will tell you.'" (Deut. 32: 7)

Again he said: 'So far as possible, for every step that a monk takes, for every drop of water that he drinks in his cell, he should consult the *gerontes*, in case he makes some mistake in this.' [18](#)

These words apply not only to monks but also to lay people living in the 'world', even though the latter may be bound by a less strict obedience to their spiritual father. If proud and willful, our fasting assumes a diabolical character, bringing us closer not to God but to Satan. Because fasting renders us sensitive to the realities of the spiritual world, it can be dangerously ambivalent: for there are evil spirits as well as good.

In the fourth place, paradoxical though it may seem, the period of Lent is a time *not of gloom but of joyfulness*. It is true that fasting brings us to repentance and to grief for sin, but this penitent grief, in the vivid phrase of St. John Climacus, is a 'joy-creating sorrow' . [19](#) The Triodion deliberately mentions both tears and gladness in a single sentence:

Grant me tears falling as the rain from heaven,O Christ,  
As I keep this joyful day of the Fast. [20](#)

It is remarkable how frequently the themes of joy and light recur in the texts for the first day of Lent:

With joy let us enter upon the beginning of the Fast.

Let us not be of sad countenance. . . .

Let us joyfully begin the all-hallowed season of abstinence;

And let us shine with the bright radiance of the holy commandments. . .

All mortal life is but one day, so it is said,

To those who labor with love.

There are forty days in the Fast;

Let us keep them all with joy. [21](#)

The season of Lent, it should be noted, falls not in midwinter when the countryside is frozen and dead, but in spring when all things are returning to life. The English word 'Lent' originally had the meaning 'springtime'; and in a text of fundamental importance the Triodion likewise describes the Great Fast as 'springtime':

The springtime of the Fast has dawned,

The flower of repentance has begun to open.

O brethren, let us cleanse ourselves from all impurity

And sing to the Giver of Light:

Glory be to Thee, who alone lovest mankind. [22](#)



Lent signifies not winter but spring, not darkness but light, not death but renewed vitality. Certainly it has its somber aspect, with the repeated prostrations at the weekday services, with the dark vestments of the priest, with the hymns sung to a subdued chant, full of compunction. In the Christian Empire of Byzantium theatres were closed and public spectacles forbidden during Lent; <sup>23</sup> and even today weddings are forbidden in the seven weeks of the fast. <sup>24</sup> Yet these elements of austerity should not blind us to the fact that the fast is not a burden, not a punishment, but a gift of God's grace:

Come, O ye people, and today let us accept  
The grace of the Fast as a gift from God. <sup>25</sup>

Fifthly and finally, our Lenten abstinence *does not imply a rejection of God's creation*. As St. Paul insists, 'Nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom. 14: 14). All that God has made is 'very good' (Gen. 1: 31): to fast is not to deny this intrinsic goodness but to reaffirm it. 'To the pure all things are pure' (Titus 1: 15), and so at the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom of heaven there will be no need for fasting and ascetic self-denial. But, living as we do in a fallen world, and suffering as we do from the consequences of sin, both original and personal, we are not pure; and so we have need of fasting. Evil resides not in created things as such but in our attitude towards them, that is, in our will. The purpose of fasting, then, is not to repudiate the divine creation but to cleanse our will. During the fast we deny our bodily impulses - for example, our spontaneous appetite for food and drink - not because these impulses are in themselves evil, but because they have been disordered by sin and require to be purified through self-discipline. In this way, asceticism is a fight not against but for the body; the aim of fasting is to purge the body from alien defilement and to render it spiritual. By rejecting what is sinful in our will, we do not destroy the God-created body but restore it to its true balance and freedom. In Father Sergei Bulgakov's phrase, we kill the flesh in order to acquire a body.

But in rendering the body spiritual, we do not thereby dematerialize it, depriving it of its character as a physical entity. The 'spiritual' is not to be equated with the non-material, neither is the 'fleshly' or carnal to be equated with the bodily. In St. Paul's usage, 'flesh' denotes the totality of man, soul and body together, in so far as he is fallen and separated from God; and in the same way 'spirit' denotes the totality of man, soul and body together, in so far as he is redeemed and divinized by grace. <sup>26</sup> Thus the soul as well as the body can become carnal and fleshly, and the body as well as the soul can become spiritual. When St. Paul enumerates the 'works of the flesh' (Gal. 5: 19-21), he includes such things as sedition, heresy and envy, which involve the soul much more than the body. In making our body spiritual, then, the Lenten fast does not suppress the physical aspect of our human nature, but makes our materiality once more as God intended it to be.

Such is the way in which we interpret our abstinence from food. Bread and wine and the other fruits of the earth are gifts from God, of which we partake with reverence and thanksgiving. If Orthodox Christians abstain from eating meat at certain times, or in some cases continually, this does not mean that the Orthodox Church is on principle vegetarian and considers meat-eating to be a sin; and if we abstain sometimes from wine, this does not mean that we uphold teetotalism. When we fast, this is not because we regard the act of eating as shameful, but in order to make our eating spiritual, sacramental and eucharistic - no longer a concession to greed but a means of communion with God the giver. So far from making us look on food as a defilement, fasting has exactly the opposite effect. Only those who have learnt to control their appetites through abstinence can appreciate the full glory and beauty of what God has given to us. To one who has eaten nothing for twenty-four hours, an olive can seem full of nourishment. A slice of plain cheese or a hard boiled egg never taste so good as on Easter morning, after seven weeks of fasting.

We can apply this approach also to the question of abstinence from sexual relations. It has long been the Church's teaching that during seasons of fasting married couples should try to live as brother and sister, but this does not at all signify that sexual relations within marriage are in themselves sinful. On the contrary, the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete - in which, more than anywhere else in the Triodion, we find summed up the significance of Lent states without the least ambiguity: Marriage is honorable, and the marriage-bed undefiled. For on both Christ has given His blessing, Eating in the flesh at the wedding in Cana, Turning water into wine and revealing His first miracle. <sup>27</sup>

The abstinence of married couples, then, has as its aim not the suppression but the purification of sexuality. Such abstinence, practiced 'with mutual consent for a time', has always the positive aim, 'that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer' (1 Cor. 7: 5). Self restraint, so far from indicating a dualist depreciation of the body, serves on the contrary to confer upon the sexual side of marriage a spiritual dimension which might otherwise be absent.

To guard against a dualist misinterpretation of the fast, the Triodion speaks repeatedly about the inherent goodness of the material creation. In the last of the services that it contains, Vespers for Holy Saturday, the sequence of fifteen Old Testament Lessons opens with the first words of Genesis, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth... : all created things are God's handiwork and as such are 'very good'. Every part of this divine creation, so the Triodion insists, joins in giving praise to the Maker:

The hosts of heaven give Him glory;

Before Him tremble cherubim and seraphim;  
Let everything that has breath and all creation  
Praise Him, bless Him, and exalt Him above all for ever.

O Thou who coverest Thy high places with the waters,  
Who settest the sand as a bound to the sea and upholdest all things:  
The sun sings Thy praises, the moon gives Thee glory,  
Every creature offers a hymn to Thee,  
His Author and Creator, for ever.

Let all the trees of the forest dance and sing. . . .

Let the mountains and all the hills  
Break forth into great rejoicing at the mercy of God,  
And let the trees of the forest clap their hands. [28](#)

This affirmative attitude towards the material world is founded not only on the doctrine of creation but also on the doctrine of Christ. Again and again in the Triodion, the true physical reality of Christ's human nature is underlined. How, then, can the human body be evil, if God Himself has in His own person assumed and divinized the body? As we state at Matins on the first Sunday in Lent, the Sunday of Orthodoxy:

Thou hast not appeared to us, O loving Lord, merely in outward semblance,  
As say the followers of Mani, who are enemies of God,  
But in the full and true reality of the flesh. [29](#)

Because Christ took a true material body, so the hymns for the Sunday of Orthodoxy make clear, it is possible and, indeed, essential to depict His person in the holy icons, using material wood and paint:

The uncircumscribed Word of the Father became circumscribed,  
Taking flesh from thee, O Theotokos,  
And He has restored the sullied image to its ancient glory,  
Pilling it with the divine beauty.  
This our salvation we confess in deed and word,  
And we depict it in the holy icons. [30](#)

This assertion of the spirit-bearing potentialities of the material creation is a constant theme during the season of Lent. On the first Sunday of the Great Fast, we are reminded of the physical nature of Christ's Incarnation, of the material reality of the holy icons, and of the visible, aesthetic beauty of the Church. On the second Sunday we keep the

memory of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), who taught that all creation is permeated by the energies of God, and that even in the present life this divine glory can be perceived through man's physical eyes, provided that his body has been rendered spiritual by God's grace. On the third Sunday we venerate the material wood of the Cross; on the sixth Sunday we bless material branches of palms; on Wednesday in Holy Week we are signed with material oil in the sacrament of Anointing; on Holy Thursday we recall how at the Last Supper Christ blessed material bread and wine, transforming them into His Body and Blood.

Those who fast, so far from repudiating material things, are on the contrary assisting in their redemption. They are fulfilling the vocation assigned to the 'sons of God' by St. Paul: 'The created universe waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . The creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now' (Rom. 8 : 19-22). By means of our Lenten abstinence, we seek with God's help to exercise this calling as priests of the creation, restoring all things to their primal splendor. Ascetic self-discipline, then, signifies a rejection of the world, only in so far as it is corrupted by the fall; of the body, only in so far as it is dominated by sinful passions. Lust excludes love: so long as we lust after other persons or other things, we cannot truly love them. By delivering us from lust, the fast renders us capable of genuine love. No longer ruled by the selfish desire to grasp and to exploit, we begin to see the world with the eyes of Adam in Paradise. Our self-denial is the path that leads to our self-affirmation; it is our means of entry into the cosmic liturgy whereby all things visible and invisible ascribe glory to their Creator.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> 1 Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), *Missionary Letters*: abbreviated from the translation in *The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius*, no. 24 (1934), pp. 26-7.

<sup>2</sup> 2 The Lenten Triodion is so entitled because on weekdays in the Great Fast the Canon at Mattins usually has only three Canticles, instead of eight as at other times of the year. To avoid confusion, we shall follow the Greek practice, reserving the name 'Triodion' to the volume for the Lenten period, and always referring to the volume for the period after Easter by the title 'Pentekostarion'.

<sup>3</sup> 3 Vespers for Saturday of the Dead.

<sup>4</sup> 4 See V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957), p. 216.

[5](#) 5 For details, see below, pp. 35-6

[6](#) 6 *Homilies on the Statues*, iii, 3-4 (P.G. [Patrologia Graeca] xlix, 51-3).

[7](#) 7 *Homilies on Fasting*, i, 10 (P.G. xxxi, 181B).

[8](#) 8 Vespers for Sunday evening (Sunday of Forgiveness); Vespers for Monday and Tuesday in the first week.

[9](#) 9 *The Diary of a Russian Priest* (London, 1967), p. 128.

[10](#) 10 Mattins for Tuesday in the first week.

[11](#) 11 Vespers for Saturday evening (Sunday of the Last Judgement).

[12](#) 12 Compare what is said in Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, *The Festal Menaion* (London, 1969). p. 16.

[13](#) 13 See below, p. 183.

[14](#) 14 *Similitudes*, V, iii, 7.

[15](#) 15 Vespers for Wednesday in the first week.

[16](#) 16 Mattins for the Sunday of the Last Judgement; Vespers for Sunday evening (Sunday of Orthodoxy).

[17](#) 17 Cantic Two, troparion 25".

[18](#) 18 *Apophtheomata Patrum*, alphabetical collection (P.G. lxxv), Antony 37 and 38. The Greek term *geron* (in Russian, *starets*) means literally an old man - old, not necessarily in years, but in spiritual experience and wisdom. He is one endowed by the Holy Spirit with the gift of seeing into men's hearts and offering them guidance.

[19](#) 19 *The Ladder of Paradise*, Step 7, title.

[20](#) 20 Vespers for Monday in the first week.

[21](#) 21 All these quotations are from Mattins for the first Monday.

[22](#) 22 Vespers for Wednesday in the week before Lent.

[23](#) 23 Photius, *Nomocanon*, Tit. vii, c. i. Might not this rule be applied by contemporary Orthodox to television?

[24](#) 24 Council of Laodicea (c. A.D. 364), Canon 52. Dispensations from this rule require episcopal permission, which should not be granted except for grave reasons.

[25](#) 25 Mattins for Monday in the first week.

[26](#) 26 The liturgical texts, however, do not always conform to this Biblical usage, but sometimes employ the word 'flesh' as a synonym for 'body'.

[27](#) 27 Canticle Nine, troparion 12.

[28](#) 28 The Great Canon, Canticle Eight, irmos; Compline for Holy Thursday; Mattins for the Sunday of the Cross; Mattins for Palm Sunday.

[29](#) 29 The Persian Mani (c. 216-76), founder of Manichaeism, advocated an uncompromising dualism. He considered that there is no salvation for man's body or for the rest of the material creation; the particles of light imprisoned in man are to be released through strict asceticism, including vegetarianism.

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Editor: Mother Mary and Bishop Kallistos Ware

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