

THE WAY OF FASTING

Together with prayer, **fasting is a critical form of ascetic discipline in the spiritual life.** Physical practices of abstinence assist in breaking forceful habits that accrue within and harden the heart over years and even over generations. However, like the phenomenon of monasticism, which we explored in the previous chapter, **the aim of fasting is** not to denigrate or destroy the body, which is always respected as “a temple of God” (1 Cor. 3:16). Rather, it is **to refine the whole person**, to render the faculties more subtle and sensitive to the outside world as well as to “the inner kingdom.”



Fasting is **another way of rejecting the split between heaven and earth.** It is a way of recognizing the catastrophic results when reality is bifurcated by false spirituality. The early ascetics deeply valued fasting. So, too, do contemporary monastics. Indeed, even lay Orthodox Christians endeavour to meet the requirements of fasting, by abstaining from dairy and meat products almost half of the entire year. Perhaps this in itself is an unconscious effort to reconcile one half of the year with the other, secular time with the sacred time of eternity.

The whole notion of fasting or abstinence has lost its significance, or at least its positive connotation, over the centuries. Nowadays, it is used in a negative sense to imply the opposite of a healthy diet or balanced engagement with the world. Those who fast are eccentric or extreme in their protest against the world; they are not seen as expressing a sense of integration with the world. Yet the early Christian and monastic interpretation of the word could not be more different. **In the early Church, fasting signified not allowing worldly values or self-centeredness to distract us from what is most essential in our relationship with God, with others, and with the world.**

Fasting implies a sense of freedom. Fasting is a way of not wanting, of wanting less, and of recognizing the wants of others. By abstaining from certain foods, we are not punishing ourselves but instead able to reserve proper value for all foods. Moreover, **fasting implies alertness.** By paying close attention to what we do, to the intake of food and the quantity of our possessions, we better appreciate the reality of suffering and the value of sharing. Fasting involves the process of absorbing pain and transforming it into renewed hope. It ultimately implies focusing on what really matters’ prioritizing what one values, and acquiring an attitude of responsiveness and responsibility.

Indeed, **fasting underlines the dignity and value of everything and everyone.** The spiritual senses are gradually and increasingly refined in such a way as to understand where one’s heart ought to be. Fasting begins as a form of detachment; however, when we learn what to let go of, we recognize what we should hold on to. Fasting is a way not of renouncing the world but of embracing the entire world, a way of looking at the world from another, a different, a mystical or sacramental perspective. It is an expression of love and compassion. The same discipline of fasting ought to characterize our words (in silence), our actions (in charity), and our relationships (in purity). Sacrifice and service coincide in the spiritual life. Fasting leads to one goal: namely, the goal of encounter or mystery. The wise inhabitants of the early desert of Egypt understood this truth well:

Abba Poemen (d. 449) said: “If three people meet, of whom the first fully preserves interior peace, the second gives thanks to God in illness, and the third serves with a pure mind, these three are doing the same work.”

In this way, **prayer and fasting** are never separated in the spiritual life from work and action. Instead, they **liberate us in order to serve others more freely**. We are no longer burdened by necessity or conditioning, but are prepared for the surprise of divine grace. Furthermore, this discipline through prayer and fasting leads to an attitude of humility, where the focus shifts from placing oneself at the center of the world to becoming involved in the service of others. A person of prayer and fasting can never tolerate creating miserable poverty for the sake of accumulating exorbitant wealth. **The moral crisis of our global economic injustice is deeply spiritual**, signalling that something is terribly amiss in our relationship with God, people, and material things. Most of us—at least those of us who live in societies shaped by Western concerns—remain insulated from and ignorant of this injustice created by current global trade and investment regimes. Fasting sensitizes us to awareness and knowledge.

Fasting means walking the way of the humble, assuming the power of prayer, and regaining a sense of wonder. It is recognizing God in all people and in all things; and it is valuing all people and all things in the light of God. **It is a critical alternative to our consumer lifestyle in Western society**, which does not permit us to notice the impact and effect of our customs and actions. Thus the spiritual world—conditioned by prayer and fasting—is anything but disconnected from the “real” world; by the same token, the “real” world is informed by the spiritual world. We are no longer disengaged from the injustice in our world. Our vision grows wider, our interest is enlarged, and our action becomes far-reaching. We cease to narrow life to our petty concerns and instead accept our vocation to transform the entire world.

Fasting does not deny the world but affirms the entire material creation. It recalls the hunger of others in a symbolic effort to identify with—or at least bring to mind—the suffering of the world in order to yearn for healing. Through fasting, the act of eating becomes the mystery of sharing, the recollection that “it is not good for man to be alone upon this earth” (Gen. 2:18) and that “man shall not live by bread alone” (Matt. 4:4). To fast, then, is to fast with and for others; ultimately, the goal of such fasting is to promote and celebrate a sense of fairness in what we have received. As is the case with every ascetic discipline in the spiritual life, **one never fasts alone in the Orthodox Church; we always fast together, and we fast at set times**. Fasting is a solemn reminder that everything we do relates to either the well-being or the wounding of others.

Thus, through fasting, we acknowledge that “the earth is the Lord’s” (Ps.24:1) and not ours to own or exploit, to consume or control. It is always to be shared in communion with others and returned in thanks to God. **Fasting is learning to give, and not simply to give up**; it is learning to connect, and not to disconnect; it is breaking down barriers of ignorance and indifference with my neighbour and with my world. It is restoring the primal vision of the world, as God intended it, and discerning the beauty of the world, as God created it. It offers a sense of liberation from greed and compulsion. Indeed, it offers a powerful corrective to our culture of selfish want and careless waste.

Except from: “*Encountering the Mystery*” by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew