

A Lenten Ladder

It really warms my heart as a spiritual father to see a good number of our parishioners trying to take up a serious fast, some for the first time in their lives. Some have asked me for guidelines on fasting, so I thought it would be worthwhile to share the following with everyone.

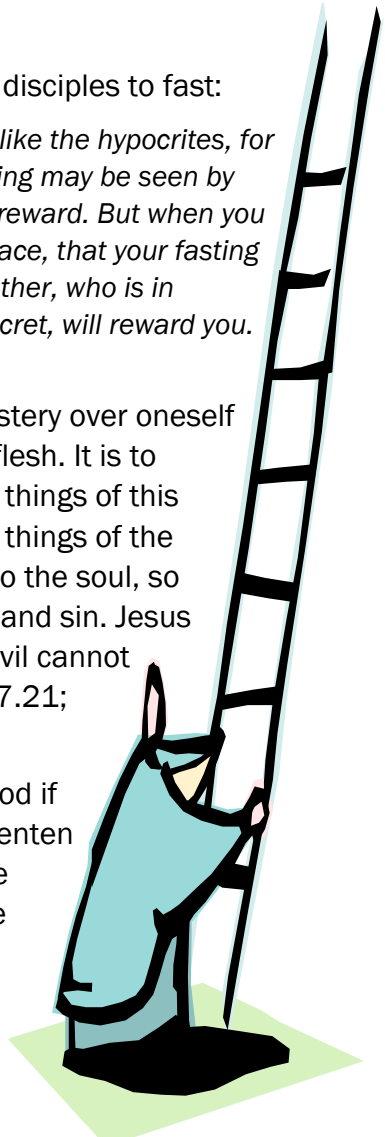
Why do it?

Jesus himself fasted and taught His disciples to fast:

And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father, who is in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6.16-18)

The purpose of fasting is to gain mastery over oneself and to conquer the passions of the flesh. It is to liberate us from dependence on the things of this world in order to concentrate on the things of the Kingdom of God. It is to give power to the soul, so that it would not yield to temptation and sin. Jesus Himself taught that some forms of evil cannot be conquered without it (Matthew 17.21; Mark 9.29).

We do not fast because it pleases God if His servants go hungry, for, as the Lenten hymns of the Church remind us, “the devil also never eats.” Neither do we fast in order to afflict ourselves with suffering and pain, for God takes no pleasure in the distress of His people. Neither do we fast with the idea that our hunger and thirst can



somehow serve as a “reparation” for our sins. Such an understanding is never given in the scriptures or the writings of the saints, which claim that there is no “reparation” for man’s sin but the crucifixion of Christ.

We fast, therefore, and *must fast*, to be delivered from carnal passions, so that the free gift of salvation in Christ might produce great fruit in our lives. We fast so that we might more effectively serve God Who loves us and has saved us. Fasting without effort in virtue is wholly in vain.

As we develop our muscles to make our bodies physically strong, and as we study to improve our minds, we must also train our souls through spiritual exercises.



Practical guidelines

Like physical exercise so with fasting: “no pain, no gain.” While there is a norm that we observe as a community, in our private lives each person must consider for himself how he ought to keep the fast. For it to have any benefit for us, our fasting discipline must be a little challenging.

A person must be careful, however, not to set too ambitious a goal, such that he is overwhelmed and gives up. Just as in physical exercise, in weight training, one cannot start lifting 500 pounds but must start by mastering 20 pounds, then 30, then 40 and so on. Likewise, we must take our spiritual exercises in steps.

In fasting we learn to de-emphasize food; we certainly do *not* want to spend Lent worrying *more* about food. We reduce both the quantity and the quality of our food. We don’t just substitute one type of delicacy for another, and we *never* look upon any

type of food as impure. We discipline ourselves to say “No.” We recognize that for many people “their belly is their god!” (Phil. 3.17-19), and that the devil even tried to tempt Jesus with bread. Jesus answered him, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4.4).

From this we learn, too, that our fasting from food must be coupled with studying the scriptures and putting them into practice. Along with simplifying our diet, our fast must involve intensified prayer at home and in church, reading of the scriptures and works of charity.

Because you asked: as an athlete increases weights gradually as his exercise regimen progresses, I humbly offer the following steps. This is my own invention; it is not Holy Tradition, but, I believe it is based on its principles, and I pray you will find it useful. As you are able to master one step, climb to the next. This particular sequence of rungs is not absolute, but it does follow a natural progression. Certainly, take the condition of your physical health into consideration, and I encourage you to discuss your discipline with your father confessor as you make your confession during this holy Lenten season. Also note that this list is not to be used to compare ourselves with anyone else. It is not for us to know who is on step 7 or 15 or not even on the ladder yet!

A Ladder of Abstinence

As you progress to the next rung, keep doing all previous steps.

1. Abstain from meats (including beef, lamb, pork, poultry, etc.) on Wednesdays and Fridays.
2. Abstain from meats Monday through Friday.
3. Abstain from dairy products (including eggs) Wednesdays and Fridays.
4. Abstain from meats all days.
5. Abstain from marital relations Monday through Saturday.
6. Abstain from dairy products Monday through Friday.
7. Abstain from fish (except shellfish) Wednesdays and Fridays.

8. Abstain from dairy products all days.
9. Abstain from fish Monday through Friday.
10. Abstain from wine (alcohol) Monday through Friday.
11. Fast from all marital relations.
12. Fast from all food until noon on Wednesdays and Fridays.
13. Abstain from fish all days.
14. Fast from all food until noon Monday through Friday.
15. Fast from all food until evening Wednesdays and Fridays.
16. Fast from all drink until noon Monday through Friday.
17. Fast from all food until evening Monday through Friday.
18. Abstain from using oil Monday through Friday.
19. Fast from all drink until evening Monday through Friday.

At the same time, as you abstain from the above, add the following to your routine.

A Ladder of Spiritual Growth

1. Hold nothing against anyone.
2. Ask forgiveness of all family members and anyone you may have possibly offended.
3. Seek confession/spiritual direction.
4. Participate in all church services and Holy Communion.
5. Put alms in your Food for Hungry People box at every meal.
6. Spend more time in prayer at home, morning and night.
7. Visit the sick and shut-ins.
8. Pray with prostrations Monday through Friday.
9. Spend more time reading your Bible and other spiritual books every day.
10. Attend any retreats or religious education programs that are offered.
11. Volunteer your time in working with the homeless and hungry people.
12. Make a retreat at an Orthodox monastery or convent.

The Church offers us this organized opportunity for spiritual growth that we call Lent, so that we can all undertake these exercises together, at the same time, thereby encouraging and supporting one another. I hope you will seize the opportunity.

Fr. Nabil Hanna, April 1994