

“For the Healing of Soul and Body: Let us Pray to the Lord”

By Bishop THOMAS (Joseph) and Subdeacon David Hyatt

*“Fasting possesses great power and it works glorious things.
To fast is to banquet with angels.”*

St. Athanasius the Great

Fasting is an important spiritual struggle that carries us into the Kingdom of God. Combined with increased prayer and almsgiving, fasting helps us to say ‘no’ to the bodily desires in order to say ‘yes’ to the spiritual riches of the virtues of Christ. St. Seraphim of Sarov writes,

“Fasting, prayer, alms, and every other good Christian deed is good in itself, but the purpose of the Christian life consists not only in the fulfillment of one or another of them. The true purpose of our Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God.”¹

There are two basic categories of fasting within the Church: the Ascetical Fast and the Eucharistic Fast. The Ascetical Fast refers to the prescribed days and seasons during the year in which we refrain from consuming all meat, meat products, dairy products, fish, olive oil and alcoholic beverages. The Eucharistic or Communion Fast refers to the period of time in which we abstain from all food and drink after midnight before receiving Holy Communion the next day. It is very important that all fasting rules be developed and followed under the direction of an Orthodox physician or dietician that is blessed by the parish priest. In certain circumstances, he may relax the traditional fasting guidelines at his discretion due to health concerns, very young children, pregnant women, or nursing mothers. (*Please refer to the Antiochian Archdiocese website for the current fasting calendar and guidelines.*) In this way, fasting can be a spiritually fruitful practice for everyone for the healing of both soul and body.

St. John Cassian (+435), a monastic saint known for his writings on the monastic life, described the difference between eating to provide for the needs of life and self-indulgence. While his writings were specifically for monks, they are also helpful for the faithful in all walks of life. He writes,

“A clear rule for self-control handed down by the Fathers is this: stop eating while still hungry and do not continue until you are satisfied.

When the Apostle said, ‘Make no provision to fulfill the desires of the flesh’ (Rom. 13:14), he was not forbidding us to provide for the needs of life; he was warning us against self-indulgence. Moreover, by itself abstinence from food does not contribute to perfect purity of soul unless the other virtues are active as well. Humility, for example, practiced through obedience in our work and through bodily hardship, is a great help.

If we avoid avarice not only by having no money, but also by not wanting to have any, this leads us towards purity of soul. Freedom from anger, from dejection, self-esteem and pride also contributes to purity of soul in general, while self-control and fasting are especially important for bringing about that specific purity of soul which comes through restraint and moderation.

No one whose stomach is full can fight mentally against the demon of unchastity. Our initial struggle therefore must be to gain control of our stomach and to bring our body into subjection

¹ St. Seraphim of Sarov, *Conversation on the Goal of the Christian Life*

not only through fasting but also through vigils, labors and spiritual reading, and through concentrating our heart on fear of Gehenna and on longing for the kingdom of heaven.”²

St. John offers us a vision of a rightly ordered relationship to food.

- Consume enough food to sustain a healthy life.
- Practice self-control so as not to overeat and become physically and spiritually lethargic.
- Combine fasting with prayer, almsgiving, spiritual reading, remembrance of death and the coming judgment, and a desire for the kingdom of heaven!

As the Holy Orthodox Church recognizes our human person as an integrated being of soul and body, made in the image and for the likeness of our Creator, it should come as no surprise that fasting is not only a spiritually profitable exercise but also a physically fruitful one. Conversely, neglecting ascetical practices prescribed by the Church cannot only take a spiritual toll, but a physical one as well. Choosing healthy ingredients for our meals that serve to sustain life, and limiting our food intake, so as not to put us at further risk for obesity, heart disease and even cancer, are all important ways that we maintain a healthy body to serve the Lord.

In 2003, a study of one hundred and twenty Eastern Orthodox adults was conducted for one year. Sixty regularly fasted (Fasters) according to the guidelines of the Orthodox Church, and the other sixty did not fast (Controls) at all throughout the year.

Results

Statistically significant end-fasting total and LDL cholesterol differences were found in fasters. Fasters compared to controls presented 12.5% lower end-total cholesterol ($p < 0.001$), 15.9% lower end-LDL cholesterol ($p < 0.001$) and 1.5% lower end-BMI ($p < 0.001$). The end- LDL/HDL ratio was lower in fasters (6.5%, $p < 0.05$) while the change in end- HDL cholesterol in fasters (4.6% decline) was not significant. Similar results were found when the pre- and end-fasting values of fasters were compared. No change was found in control subjects.

Conclusions

Adherence to Eastern Orthodox fasting periods contributes to a reduction in the blood lipid profile including a non-significant reduction in HDL cholesterol and possible impact on obesity.³

Further recognizing the natural integration of all spheres of the human person, we should be aware that a neglected body, often manifest as high-caloric or ill-advised product consumption, may not only contribute to physical ailments, but that related health issues have been associated with psychological distress and depression. Though these relationships are not well understood, they do seem to exist. While the complex interaction of human conditions arising at the fall seem elusive to man, we must remember that the Church remains the hospital in which eternal cure can be found. This said, improper understanding and application of Her ascetical practices can also be damaging.

One temptation that frequently arises during fasting seasons is to eat highly processed foods which, while adhering to the fasting guidelines, are full of unhealthy ingredients. It is important to remember that when we fast, we do so by eating less and more simply in ingredients. When we spend so much

² St. John Cassian, *On the Eight Vices: On the Demon of Unchastity and the Desire of the Flesh*

³ [BMC Public Health](https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-3-16). 2003; 3: 16. Published online 2003 May 16. doi: [10.1186/1471-2458-3-16](https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-3-16)

time inventing substitute meals that are so tasty that our stomachs do not realize we are fasting, we are sabotaging our fast and robbing ourselves of the spiritual fruit of our labors.

Rita Madden, an Orthodox Christian and Registered Dietician and Nutritionist (RDN) and author of *Food, Faith and Fasting*, writes,

“Many highly processed foods contain artificial ingredients such as: food dyes, sweeteners, and additives/preservatives. These artificial foods can be harmful to one’s health. It can be an easy out to choose many of these food-like substances when we are not fasting, but even more so when we are fasting. We need to stick to the real, basic foods that the church outlines as our fasting food options because as Saint Paisios cautions, “Today people make illicit and deceitful businesses. However, they should not falsify food substances, because they become the cause of harming people’s health.”

Modern-day science demonstrates that many of these artificially created food-like items are taking a toll on our health. St. Seraphim of Sarov taught that: “Every day one should partake of just enough food to permit the body, being fortified, to be a friend and helper to the soul in performing the virtues. Otherwise, with the body exhausted the soul may also weaken.” A key word in this teaching—and especially when it comes to our fasting days—is fortified. When we fast, we should choose real quality foods that provide us the nourishment we need and that fall into the guidelines of our Holy Orthodox Tradition. The prescribed foods have nutrients our body needs but are free of the harmful synthetic ingredients. To illustrate: butter is out when we fast, so we choose margarine instead, and half-n-half is not consumed so we choose Coffee Mate. But both margarine and Coffee Mate are harmful to our health; whereas when butter and half-n-half are consumed as a part of a balanced diet they can be food choices that provide the body some of the nutrition it needs. In addition, we do not want to miss the purpose of the fast because we always have a replacement. This downplays the essence of the fast as what happens is during the fasting period, we just choose other satisfying options versus allowing ourselves to feel a physical hunger. This physical hunger is pertinent in reminding us that our true food is Christ and our real hunger is for Him. When we choose to say no to certain foods and let go of the “replacement game” we choose to renounce our own will and utilize the discipline of fasting to put God’s will first in our life.

The church has always provided dispensations from fasting when it comes to: specific illnesses, the very young and old, pregnant women and nursing mothers. Yes, children are growing but can do some level of fasting. Where your family is at in the fasting discipline is what needs to be determined with your parish priest (or spiritual father). We live in a land of plenty and when the right food choices are made, both children and adults can attain the nutrients they need while letting go of the non-fasting foods for a period of time.”

Children are able to fast as a regular part of the life of the Church with their family, under the guidance of an Orthodox physician or dietician that is blessed by the parish priest. In many parishes, children begin to observe the Eucharistic or Communion Fast between the ages of 6 and 8 years old. With the loving instruction and nurture of their parents, children can both understand why we fast and learn to embrace fasting with their family and parish community. It is most important that the parents are good role models for their children in joyfully fasting out of love for God and a desire to grow into His

likeness. Reading examples from the Holy Scriptures and the lives of the Saints are also important ways to help children understand and embrace the fast.

St. Porphyrios, in *Wounded by Love*, describes the important role of parents in the formation of their children's love for God and the formation of ascetical practices. He writes,

“What saves and makes for good children is the life of the parents in the home. The parents need to devote themselves to the love of God. They need to become saints in their relation to their children through their mildness, prayer and love. They need to make a new start every day, with a fresh outlook, renewed enthusiasm and love for their children. And the joy that will come to them, the holiness that will visit them, will shower grace on their children.”⁴

In this way, children come to understand the full life of the Church and their participation in it, motivated by a loving desire to become saints. St. Basil writes,

“Fasting protects children, chastens the young, makes seniors venerable.... If all were to take fasting as the counselor for their actions, nothing would prevent a profound peace from spreading throughout the entire world.”⁵

Whether we be a child or an adult, we should not neglect, under the guidance of our priest or spiritual father, the fasting practices of the Church. As St. Anthony the Great reminds us,

“Do not neglect the Fast; it constitutes an imitation of Christ's way of life.”

This life in Christ is indeed the path back to union with God that was tragically lost at the fall. In this regard, we should not approach our fasting with a frown. As we recall what was lost at the fall, the very wholeness of man, we can both look back upon it and forward to the restored fullness of life that awaits those who seek it. Fasting is thus not only a taste of what once was, but a foretaste of what is again to come. This practice reminds us that while all things are possible, only One is necessary. It is in this context that we heed the following words of St. Theophan the Recluse, wherein he instructs,

“Fasting appears gloomy until one steps into its arena. But begin and you will see what light it brings after darkness, what freedom from bonds, what release after a burdensome life.”

This article was written in cooperation with and approved by Dr. James Rossetti and Rita Madden.

Rita Madden (MPH, RDN), a Registered Dietician and Nutritionist, MPH, RDN conducts workshops that utilize the Holy Eastern Orthodox tradition as the foundation to guide us in caring for health. In these workshops she also explores fasting healthfully, for both body and soul alike, for the entire family. It is also quite humbling to see how the outline of eating that the church provides us is also a healthy approach to prevent and manage many chronic diseases as well as a way to care for the environment.

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⁴ St. Porphyrios, *Wounded by Love* (Limni, Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey Publisher, 2015), 196.

⁵ St. Basil the Great, *On Fasting and Feasts* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), 77.