

*Food and Sex, Fasting  
and Chastity:  
Goods of the Body, Goods of the Soul*

# Catechesis of fasting

*By Adam A.J. DeVille*

■ In April of 2002—during what Fr. Richard John Neuhaus has called the Long Lent of 2002—the cardinals of the Roman Church in the United States went to Rome to meet with Pope John Paul II to discuss the unfolding sex abuse crisis. The pope called for the crisis to yield fruit in a holier priesthood, holier episcopate, and holier Church. While such a process of *theosis* and sanctification has myriad manifestations, I am convinced that there are few better ways to do that than through the ancient and venerable practice of fasting.

In our day, we have become so estranged from this practice that the very word is often a source of complete bafflement to many. Fasting is more often misunderstood and simply ignored than we realize. Most Christians today in the West are radically estranged from the theology and spirituality of fasting, and it is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the churches today. Gone is the necessary eschatological horizon against which fasting makes sense. Today we seem to prefer a much more “incarnational spirituality,” as the pre-eminent Byzantine liturgical historian, Robert Taft, S.J., argued

twenty years ago. Such spirituality in the West has dealt what he called “a death blow to fasting, penance, mortification. Today among contemporary religious one hears more of gourmet cooking than of fasting—a striking counter symbol to anyone even superficially acquainted with the spiritual literature at the origins of religious life.”<sup>1</sup> Given such a context, is it any wonder that many simply imagine that fasting has been abolished—or, if it has not been, then it should be since we moderns are too busy to subject ourselves to such discipline. Others think that simple abstinence from certain foods—usually flesh meats—once a week is really all that is meant or required. There is, then, widespread ignorance about fasting, and we need to undertake anew an entire “catechesis of fasting,” so to speak.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences of the downplaying, or outright destruction, of such ascetic practices as fasting are not to be underestimated in the life of the soul and, perforce, of the Church at large. Many of the leaders of the churches today seem still to believe in a “Christianity Lite,” premised upon the fiction that everybody is so busy these

days that we cannot possibly propose to them a serious, disciplined, time-consuming religion: better to give them a little bit and let them get on their way. We have proposed minimal demands and therefore achieved minimal, often spectacularly pathetic, results. The paradox is this: ask a little, get less, but ask a lot, and get more.<sup>3</sup> People want to be challenged; people are waiting, sometimes eagerly, to make what Pope John Paul II calls the “total gift of self.” They simply need to be asked—and if they are not asked then alternatives are awaiting them, and they are almost invariably deleterious. The astonishing growth of, e.g., Mormonism—with its serious disciplines and demands—and other cults is proof enough of this.<sup>4</sup>

Recovery of the practice of fasting in a Western context will not be easy—and not simply because obesity is rising at alarming rates in North America. An entire “catechesis of fasting,” so to speak, needs to be undertaken anew to reacquaint our people with this highly valued and valuable ascetic practice. Let us begin with some history of fasting before looking at some of the related concerns that need to be addressed and then concluding with some practical reflections.

Where do we turn to find a renewed understanding of fasting and all that it entails?

In his recent book *Christendom Awake: On Reenergizing the Church in Culture*, the English Dominican scholar Aidan Nichols argued that since so many practices and teachings of the West have been lost or deliberately destroyed in the last forty years especially, there is a need to turn *ad Orientem* and look to the Orthodox Churches,<sup>5</sup> which have preserved both right doctrine and sound practices:

At the present time, the Catholic Church, in many parts of the world, is undergoing one of the most serious crises in its history.... This crisis touches many aspects of Church life, but notably theology and catechesis, liturgy and spirituality, Religious [sic] life and Christian ethics at large. Orthodoxy is well placed to stabilize Catholicism in most if not all these areas.<sup>6</sup>

If we look to Orthodoxy for guidance on fasting, what do we find? The Eastern Churches of the Byzantine tradition—in addition to fasting each Wednesday and Friday,<sup>7</sup> since Christ was betrayed on the former and died on the latter—know four major fasting periods of the year: the pre-Christmas fast, popularly known as St. Philip’s fast (on the evening of whose feast it begins), which lasts for forty days prior to the celebration of the Nativity of Christ; the Great Fast of Lent, the longest, most solemn and important of the fasting seasons, beginning at Forgiveness Vespers prior to Pure Monday, lasting for 40 days prior to Palm Sunday, and then being supplanted by a still more rigorous observance for Holy Week itself; the Apostles’ Fast, beginning after Pentecost and leading up to the celebration of Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29th; and the Dormition Fast beginning in August and lasting until the celebration of the Dormition of the Theotokos, August 15th (the feast the West calls the Assumption of Mary). The particular details of each fast vary both from church to church (e.g., the Copts are among the most strict, and have additional requirements over and above the Byzantine tradition) and from place to place, but in general terms, taking the example of Great Lent, the following may be said.

In the first place, the most important lesson about fasting is that taught by Christ in the gospels: fasting is not to make us gloomy! It is not a bitter, excruciating ordeal: “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites . . . But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father” (Matt. 6:16-17). Already the note is sounded: fasting, while a form of self-denial, is nonetheless a cause of our joy and it is this joy, rather than the fast, that we should manifest to the world. As the late Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann wrote in his *For the Life of the World*:

The Church is in time and its life in this world is fasting, that is, a life of effort, sacrifice, self-denial



and dying. The Church's very mission is to become all things to all men. But how could the Church fulfill this mission, how could it be the salvation of the world, if it were not, first of all and above everything else, the divine gift of Joy, the fragrance of the Holy Spirit, the presence here in time of the feast of the Kingdom?<sup>8</sup>

Schemmann expands on the joy of fasting in his later book, the short but very rich *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*. In what Eastern theologians regard as an antinomy—one of many that marks out the Christian life as one of paradox—fasting, Schemmann argues, “rather than weakening us makes us light, concentrated, sober, joyful, pure.”<sup>9</sup>

This note of joy resounds throughout the Byzantine liturgical texts of Great Lent. Unlike the West, where the *Gloria* and the alleluias are suppressed during Lent, the Byzantine tradition re-doubles its singing of alleluias<sup>10</sup> because it finds joy in the fast, but, more to the point, finds joy in the goal of the fast: risen life in and with Christ. In the *Triodion*, the major liturgical book of Great Lent, we are exhorted thus: “Let us receive the announcement of Lent with joy! The time of Lent is a time of gladness! With radiant purity and pure love, filled with resplendent prayer and all good deeds, let us sing with joy!” Lent, like Christianity properly so called, is incompatible with a morose sadness; the only sadness we can have—that over our sins—is tempered by the joy that knows no end, the joy that Christ wants to give us abundantly.<sup>11</sup>

Such a joy has led Schemmann to dub Great Lent a time of “bright sadness.” It is bright

because it leads to the light of the Risen Christ, but it is sad because we are called upon to weep over our sins and do penance for them. Fasting, then, is not only a cause of joy but is undeniably an act of penance—but a penance never undertaken out of guilt or loathing, but only in joy.

Penance in the East is understood differently than it has been in the West, where a more juridical mentality has often been prevalent. (There is a story, possibly apocryphal, of Evelyn Waugh carrying around a small kitchen scale during Lent in the 1950s to weigh all his meals to ensure he did not infringe on the regulations then in force in the Roman Church!) Penance, as Schemmann has said by way of a reflection on the Prodigal Son, is less an act of reparation for infractions committed than it is a “deep desire to return, to go back, to recover that lost home.”<sup>12</sup> If sin, as Schemmann has put it, is “the deviation of my love from God, preferring the ‘far country’ to the beautiful home of the Father,”<sup>13</sup> then penance is that *therapia* which helps me come to my senses and realize what I have lost and what I need to do to recover it. Penance, in the final analysis, heals us in order that we might forget about ourselves. In Taft’s words, penance is “not a turning in on self, not a concentration on self-discipline as some sort of spiritual athletics, but an openness to new life, and through it openness to others, the end to which it is all supposed to lead.”<sup>14</sup>

Precisely to open us to new life, the Church has always recommended fasting in a variety of forms. Some clarification of terms is here needed. First, when the Eastern Churches speak of fasting, that often means two things. First, it includes *abstinence*, i.e., refraining from eating certain types of foods—usually flesh meats. Abstinence from meat is the traditional rule on almost all Wednesdays and Fridays of the year.<sup>15</sup> During the four fasting periods, however, abstinence can also include all animal products whatsoever, and thus include dairy—as well as oil and alcohol. The

latter two, however, are permitted on week-ends—when fasting is forbidden but abstinence still pertains—and certain feast days, such as the Annunciation.

Second, “fasting” includes both abstinence as well as limiting the intake of food to one meal a day. Thus, under the shorthand of “fasting,” the strict, traditional rule for Great Lent<sup>16</sup> in particular mandates both an *abstinence* from all animal products (only fish, without a backbone, may be eaten) together with a *fast* whereby one eats usually only one meal a day which is simple in its preparation (i.e., should involve a minimum of cooking so that the time saved can be devoted to prayer and the poor) and not eaten until after 3:00 p.m. (the hour of Jesus’ death on the Cross). However, insofar as one is able, one should not eat until after the Lenten Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts, typically held in the early evening, like the Vespers service it basically is. As fasting makes such demands on us, the Church offers us the celestial food of the Divine Eucharist more often during Great Lent to sustain us on our journey toward Pascha.

This is the strict, traditional rule—fasting and abstinence—but the Eastern genius has always been to allow much diversity and freedom, tempering also the “rule” with a spirit of *oikonomia* that takes account of human weakness.<sup>17</sup> This fast, then, is not juridically imposed in all its rigor. Many people today will only observe abstinence from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays, and both abstinence and fasting on Pure Monday (the day Great Lent begins, typically occurring—for those on the Gregorian paschalion—two days before the Western Ash Wednesday) as well as Great and Holy Friday. More strict observance is typical in monastic communities, as well as in parts of some Slavic countries like Ukraine—as well as the Middle East (especially among the Copts in Egypt).

At first glance, the traditional fast looks overwhelming. The point to consider, howev-

er, is not how much is demanded, but how much we can give. Each person considers his own circumstance and, with spiritual counsel, decides what to observe. As one author has put it, “the main thought which runs like a thread throughout the pages of the Typicon is *wise discretion*—the highest of all the virtues according to St. Anthony the Great.”<sup>18</sup> There is room for the maximalist and the minimalist, and everyone in between as our conscience directs. As the hieromonk Seraphim Rose has observed, the fast is not to be a “straight-jacket” for us but, rather, the “gold standard” against which each individual can measure his own progress in all humility.

The Eastern Church has never expected that everyone will undertake this fast, and in many cases, people positively should not undertake the fast if, e.g., they are sick or pregnant. In addition, Tradition has always counseled that what is most important in determining how to fast is to consult with one’s spiritual father or mother and to seek his or her direction and follow that rigorously. For pride can often lurk behind our desire to fast. Better to observe a small fast with much humility and under obedience than a large one with great pride. As the *Triodion* memorably puts it, “In vain do you rejoice in not eating, O soul! For you abstain from food, but from passions you are not purified. If you have no desire for improvement, you will be despised as a lie in the eyes of God.”

In addition to a fast from food, the Eastern tradition has also counseled the purification of our passions through a “fast” for the other senses. Inter alia, Schmemmann counsels a fast to “control our speech”<sup>19</sup> so that we can recover a measure of silence in our spiritual life without which we cannot hear the voice of the Lord. Fr. Lev Gillet mentions other fasts and their rationale in his *The Year of Grace of the Lord*:

Is it possible to keep one’s attention concentrated on Jesus, to look towards him, if one turns to dancing, the radio, television, films, the theatre or nov-

els for one's pleasure? And I am not speaking only of erotic novels or entertainments; even things which, in themselves, are not bad...distract our attention from the Saviour, and make us insensitive to His presence. A saint can find Jesus everywhere, but this is difficult for the ordinary Christian.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, there has been a pious tradition—at one time canonically required, at least of clerics—for husband and wife to abstain from conjugal relations during some or all of Great Lent. This is premised upon the belief not that sex is bad (as the French Orthodox layman Paul Evdokimov once put it, “Under the grace of the sacrament, the sexual life is lived without causing the slightest decline of the inner life”) but precisely that it is a good to be freely, joyfully given up for a greater good and larger share in the joy God wants to bestow.

In sum, as various scholars remind us, fasting, like all forms of discipline, “is not a pitting of the spirit against the flesh, but rather body and soul united together against sin, body and soul converted together to the Lord. The whole man must cooperate with God's grace. The whole man must love the Lord.”<sup>21</sup> Far from being against the body—as many dime store commentators on Christianity would suggest—true “Christian asceticism is a fight, not *against* but *for* the body.”<sup>22</sup> The body is valuable and a precious gift of the Creator—who Himself of course took on human flesh—but its value is only recognizable paradoxically when it is not pampered but denied, as in fasting: “fasting in Christianity is only truly itself when it realizes the sacredness of the body.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the rigors of the various fasts, especially those in Great Lent, the Eastern Churches also encourage those other crucial concomitants of fasting, viz., prayer and works of charity. As Schmemmann puts it, “fasting as a physical effort is totally meaningless without its spiritual counterpart: ‘by fasting and *prayer*.’”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the Triodion reminds Eastern Christians of their obligations not only to fast and pray but also to “loose every knot of iniquity, let us tear up every unrighteous bond, let us distribute

bread to the hungry and welcome to our homes those who have no roof over their heads.”

Of the additional prayer encouraged of the faithful during Great Lent in particular, none is so beloved or well known as the Prayer of St. Ephrem, recited several times a day with full prostrations:

O Lord and Master of my life!  
Take from me the spirit of sloth, faint-heartedness, lust of power and idle talk  
But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to Thy servant.  
Yes, O Lord and King!  
Grant me to see my own errors and not to judge my brother;  
For Thou are blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.

“But give rather the spirit of chastity.” This prayer becomes all the more important in a time of crisis for the Roman Catholic Church in the United States in particular. Permit me to conclude with a personal example that I trust will make clear the link between sex and fasting that I myself have learned and continue to learn.

A few years ago, when I first attempted the full, traditional fast in all its rigor, I fully expected that I would last, at most, for a day or two but no more. The prospect of no meat (let alone no dairy or anything else) made me almost want to weep. With Chesterton, I believe that “Catholicism is a thick steak, a frosted stout, and a good cigar,” and the idea of giving up any of those was unbearably hard enough even to think about. So I figured I was in for a fiendishly difficult time and would scarcely make it through the first few days before throwing up my hands in disgust at my weakness. I was in for a surprise.

What I found in that fast, and have found in subsequent years, was a great gift. God gave me the grace to undertake that fast and to stick to it. Far from crawling along, fighting every urge and hunger pang every hour of every day, the fast progressed with a serenity that I could not expect and did indeed make me much more—to borrow Fr. Schmemmann's words once more—“light, concentrated, joyful” and,

yes, “pure.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, on that latter point I discovered something I could learn no other way except by fasting: the struggle to be pure and chaste—especially as a single male in our world, full as it is of temptations at every turn—has much to learn from the struggle to fast. For if one can give up food, which the body absolutely requires to stay alive, then one can certainly give up the attachment to the sensual passions—which, contrary to our world, one does not need to indulge to stay alive. (As Waugh once wrote, “People today say you cannot be happy unless your sex life is happy. That makes about as much sense as saying you cannot be happy unless your golf life is happy. It’s not only nonsense, it’s mischievous nonsense.”)

Pope John Paul has called on us to build a holier Church, and in his 1995 letter *Oriental Lumen*, exhorted Latin Catholics in particular to learn from their Eastern brethren so that the Church can again breathe with both lungs. From the East, then, source of the ris-

ing Son, may we receive the gift of fasting as just such a practice that unites, purifies, and strengthens us as the one Body of Christ. In our day more than ever, we need to make a resolution to fast and purify ourselves and the Church, in the process receiving the gift of joy and new life at Pascha, where we may sing—in the words of the paschal tropar so beloved by Eastern Christians: “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowing life!” ■



### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Taft, *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed. (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 2001), 73.

<sup>2</sup> For a general sociological overview of religion and fasting, see Kathleen M. Dugan, “The Place of Fasting in the Christian Tradition,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 539-548. For the biblical perspective on fasting, see Curtic C. Mitchell, “The Practice of Fasting in the New Tes-

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tament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147(1990): 455-69; and Susan Mathews, “The Biblical Evidence on Fasting,” *Diakonia* 24 (1991): 93-108. For fasting in the early Fathers, see Joan L. Roccasivo, “Fasting in the Primitive Church,” *Diakonia* 30 (1997): 107-118; and for fasting in early canonical sources, see Ioan Dura, “The Canons of the Sixth Ecumenical Synod Concerning Fasting and Their Application to the Present Needs of the Orthodox Faithful,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 40 (1995): 149-64.

<sup>3</sup> I have argued this paradox elsewhere. See my “When Sects Put us to Shame: The Enfeeblement of the Church,” *Catholic Insight*, vol. XI, no. 1 (January-February 2003): 36-39.

<sup>4</sup> As Dugan puts it, “Paradoxically, as Christians fast less, we are meeting people who persist in this practice as an essential component of their devotions. The years fasts of Ramadan and Yom Kippur . . . among Muslims and Jews . . . [and] the Buddhist and Hindu communities demonstrate their profound response to the spiritual life in frequent and rigorous fasting.” Dugan, “The Place of Fasting,” 547.

<sup>5</sup> Such a consideration of Orthodoxy is certainly not undertaken in a triumphalistic or sanctimonious manner since many Orthodox—in some cases even more than Catholics—have also neglected the tradition of fasting.

<sup>6</sup> Aidan Nichols, *Christendom Awake: On Re-energizing the Church in Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 183.

<sup>7</sup> A practice for which some evidence is to be found as early as the Shepherd of Hermas, c. 120 A.D.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000 [1963]), 59.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001 [1969]), 98.

<sup>10</sup> Liturgically, however, the Byzantine tradition manifests a Lenten spirit not by suppressing the joy of the services but by “fasting” from full celebra-

tions of the Divine Liturgy, whose paschal character makes it inappropriate for the weekdays of Great Lent; it is celebrated only on major feasts and weekends. In its place, the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts is offered instead—which is basically Vespers with Holy Communion attached. Other liturgical manifestations of a Lenten spirit include the use of different tones in the chanting of services, the increase in both number and length of services, and a markedly different content to the lesser hours, especially Sext and None, when the life of St. John Climacus is read in addition to extra Psalmody and Old Testament readings.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. John 15:11.

<sup>12</sup> Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Taft, *Beyond East and West*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> There are four exceptions: meat on Wednesdays and Fridays is permitted during Bright (Easter) Week, Pentecost Week, Meatfare Week, and Christmas Week.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this, see Andru Erastov, “The Rules of the Typicon Concerning Fasting During Great Lent,” *Orthodox Life* 43 (1993): 14-17.

<sup>17</sup> For more on *oikonomia*, see Dura, “The Canons of the Six Ecumenical Synod Concerning Fasting,” 160-163.

<sup>18</sup> Erastov, “The Rules of the Typicon Concerning Fasting,” 15.

<sup>19</sup> Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Lev Gillet, *The Year of Grace: A Scriptural and Liturgical Commentary on the Calendar of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Deborah Cowan (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001 [original English edition: 1980]), 240.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Mathews, “The Biblical Evidence of Fasting,” 106.

<sup>22</sup> Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Dugan, “Fasting for Life,” 548.

<sup>24</sup> Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 97

<sup>25</sup> Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 98.



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