

CHAPTER 2

FASTING

“Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly”
(Joel 2:15)

A) Spiritual Understanding of Fasting

B) Significance of Fasting for Spiritual Life

C) Why Do I Fast?

D) How Do I Fast?

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A) SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING OF FASTING

Two concepts of fasting:

a) Fasting, in its special meaning is abstaining from food for a period of time, followed by eating food free from animal product.

b) Fasting, in its general meaning, involves all kinds of asceticism and overcoming the desires of the flesh.

St. John Tebaisy said, “Fasting for the body is to be hungry for food, but fasting for the soul is to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness and fasting from doing evil.” St. Paul said, “Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become

disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:25-27) Let us first discuss the subject of fasting in its general meaning: subduing the body.

Subduing the body:

St. Paul the great missionary and evangelist, who ascended to the third heavens, saw unspeakable matters, and who labored more than any of the apostles, says, **“I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”** (1 Corinthians 9:27) **Is it possible that such a great saint be disqualified? Is it possible that, after he had been worthy of seeing many visions, he could fall in the lust of the flesh and lose the reward in heaven?**

St. Paul’s words clarify an important aspect of the true Christian spiritual struggle; in order to guarantee our salvation, we have always to be on guard. Some people say, “We are saved”, meaning we are going to heaven. How can we be sure of that when we live in earthly bodies and need to struggle against the body? **St. Peter’s says, “If the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”** (1 Peter 4:18)

Truly, what hinders the spiritual growth in virtues for anyone is the desires of the flesh. St. James says, “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?” (James 4:1) The spirit desires to be with God, but the body pulls it down and hinders its growth. **The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things you wish**” (Galatians 5:17)

St. Paul defines the Christian as the one who subdues the body and its passions and desires. **“And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”** (Galatians 5:24) **Hence, subduing the body should have priority in our spiritual struggle for a perfect Christian life.** In order to mold iron, it is not enough to soften it with fire, but you have to hammer it into the shape you want. Similarly, it is not enough to soften our hearts with the flame of prayers, for example, but we have to hammer them with the hammer of asceticism and piety. “If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13)

If we want to follow Jesus, piety and asceticism are the cross, which we must always carry. “Always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10)

David wrote, "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." (Psalms 44:22) Truly, we do not deserve the real joy of the Spirit unless we mortify all the lust of the body and any worldly desire inside us. Remember that Sarah bore a son of the spirit, "Isaac" though she was barren. Our Lord Jesus did not return from Egypt to his homeland until the death of Herod who was looking to kill Him. You also have to kill Herod, who is looking to destroy your soul, referring to subduing of the body, before the Lord can come into your heart.

Overcoming one's desires and lust in itself needs a great struggle. "He who rules his spirit is better than he that takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32) St. Ambrose said, "Our lusts are our greater enemies more than the outside ones. What Joseph did when he controlled himself against the temptations of his master's wife is greater than all that he did when he became the second man in Egypt." St. John Chrysostom said about David, "When David did not fight back his enemy, Saul, this was a greater accomplishment than his killing of Goliath the giant" Fasting is one of the important means of subduing the body and its desires.

What is fasting?

Fasting is deprivation from some food, gradually becoming voluntary abstinence from food. This is not to weaken the body, but to subdue it and to revive the spirit. It is not an obligation we are forced to do, but rather we need it because of our troublesome body. It is not a matter concerning the body, as much as it is concerning the spirit. Its purpose is not repentance for our sins, but preparing oneself to receive God, for there is no work that can forgive the sins except the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus.

B) SIGNIFICANCE OF FASTING FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

In general, fasting has a special significance in the spiritual life. The practices and sayings of our fathers in both the Old and the New Testaments emphasize this. As well, our Lord Jesus honored it by practicing it and by His sayings. The opinion of some saints is that the struggle of fasting should precede all other struggles. If the body is not overcome and subdued, one finds his spirit hindered from being uplifted to God. Mar Isaac said, "**Every struggle against sin and its desires should start by fasting, especially if the struggle is against an inner sin.**"

Hence, all those who want to struggle have to start from the first step. Our Lord started His ministry from this point. When He was baptized, the Spirit led Him to the wilderness, and He fasted forty days and forty nights. **All those who want to follow His steps have to lay the foundation of their struggle according to what He had done.** Let us now discuss the significance of fasting.

First: in the Old Testament:

The sin of the first man was against fasting. God had commanded Adam not to eat from the fruit of a certain tree but he disobeyed and ate from it, and all mankind was punished.

St. John Chrysostom said, "When God created the first man, He told him to fast to control himself. As a loving father, God was concerned about Adam's salvation. He told him; "From all the fruits of the trees you can eat except the tree of the knowledge of evil

and good, you cannot eat from that.” Is not this a form of fasting? Since fasting in paradise was important, how much more would it be outside the paradise!”

If Adam had obeyed that voice of God, he would not have heard the second voice, “You are dust and you return to dust.” Adam’s punishment was death when he disobeyed God and neglected fasting. On the other hand, many of God’s people fasted and performed great works. Group fasting also gave wondrous results.

Moses, the prophet, after he had fasted forty days, became worthy to see God, talk to Him and to receive from Him the Ten Commandments written by God’s finger.

Elijah after he had fasted forty days, was honored to see God raise the dead and open the gates of heaven.

Esther, by fasting, was able to remove the punishment of death inflicted on her people.

Daniel was fasting when angel Gabriel appeared and revealed to him God’s secrets.

Judith fasted all her days after becoming a widow.

Nehemiah, when he heard the sorrowful news of his brothers in Jerusalem and how the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed and its doors burnt down with fire, fasted, wept and prayed to God. (Nehemiah 1:4)

Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, the prophetess, “was a widow of about eighty-four years who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.” (Luke 2:37)

David, prophet and king, said, “I humbled myself with fasting.” (Psalms 35:13) “My knees are weak through fasting, And my flesh is feeble from lack of fatness.” (Psalms 109:24)

Even Ahab, the wicked king, upon hearing the words of Elijah about the catastrophes that were about to happen to him, rent his clothes, put sackcloth upon his flesh, fasted and went about mourning. Afterwards God told Elijah, “See how Ahab humbled himself before me? Because he humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days.” (1 Kings 21:29)

God spoke through Isaiah the prophet, about the acceptable fasting, its rules and its blessings. He said, “Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:6) Certainly, God delights with fasting and that Israel’s sin was due to their failure to follow the rules of the fast.

As for group fasting, we have the following examples: when the people of Nineveh fasted, (Jonah 3:5-10), when the Israelites fasted during their war with the Benjamites, (Judges 20:26) and the fasting of the people of Israel during the time of Samuel the prophet. (1 Samuel

7:6) Also, king Jehoshaphat declared a fasting throughout Judah when the Moabites and Ammonites came to fight him. (2 Chronicles 20:3) Again, Ezra asked all the people with him to fast when he was going to Jerusalem. He said, "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before God. So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer." (Ezra 8:21, 23)

Second: In the New Testament:

Fasting in the Old Testament **is continued in Christianity**. Jesus confirmed its necessity and effect in the believer's life when He fasted forty days and forty nights. **Obviously, our Lord did not need to fast. He fasted on behalf of all mankind, or in another words, the human race fasted through Him as He was considered the second Adam. He presented Himself as an example to teach us the way to victory in our struggles with the enemy.**

In the Sermon on the Mountain which is the "Constitution of Christianity", Jesus talked about fasting as a basic topic. (Matthew 6:16-18)

When John's disciples asked Jesus, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" He answered, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and they will fast." (Matthew 9:14-15) Jesus also in a definitive way said about fasting, **"This kind (the devil) can come out by nothing but by prayers and fasting."** (Mark 9:29) These words contain the secret of victory in our spiritual struggle and our Lord has made it clear.

We see the effect of fasting and its practice in the Church of the New Testament after the bridegroom (Jesus) ascended to heaven. The writer of Acts wrote about fasting, "Then having fasted and prayed, they sent Barnabas and Paul away" (Acts 13:3) Also on the way to Italy, when St. Paul was on the ship a great storm arose and they were in danger; they fasted (Acts 27)

St. Paul talked about fasting in several places in his epistles. "In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings." (2 Corinthians 6:5) In another place, he said, "In hunger and thirst, in fastings often." (2 Corinthians 11:27) He talked to the husbands and wives saying, "Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer." (1 Corinthians 7:5)

Third: In the Life of the Fathers of the Church:

History is full of great examples of God's people who attained high levels of holiness by fasting. All the saints, without any exception, fasted because they realized its benefits. They wrote about their experiences and were called "the fasters or those who fast" owing to their great love for fasting.

St. Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea, never ate meat since he became an Archbishop. He used to wear hair sackcloth under his clothes. He said, **“We were expelled from the earthly paradise because we did not fast, therefore, we have to fast to return to the heavenly paradise.** Fasting restores to us all the losses due to Adam’s failure to fast, and it reconciles us with God.” He also said, “Fasting controls the powers of fire and shuts the lions’ mouths.” He was referring to the three youths in the furnace and to Daniel in the lions’ den.

St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople, used to eat only wet wheat throughout the period of his Patriarchate. He said regarding fasting, **“Fasting fights our enemies, delivers us from their bondage, and leads us to our true freedom.”** Do you want to know how can fasting protect people? Think of the ascetics, hermits, who used to flee from the noises of the world and live in caves on top of mountains in the solitude of the desert. They fast all their lives. They considered fasting their partner in life. Fasting made them like angels and enlightened them. Moses and Elijah fasted first before they could see God and talk to Him.

St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, said regarding the Holy Lent, “He, Who was free from every sin, fasted forty days, and you, sinner, do not like fasting. There is a new flood for forty days wherein God’s blessings keep pouring to drown our sins and preserve the virtues and holiness in our hearts.”

St. Jerome said, **“The Lord Himself sanctified His baptism by fasting forty days and taught us that the devils can be conquered by fasting and prayer.** St. Paul, after talking about hunger, thirst, all his tedious efforts and dangers from robbers, mentioned his many fasting. Adam obeyed his stomach much more than God; therefore, he was expelled from the paradise. Satan tempted even the Lord Jesus Himself by hunger. Everyone worships the one he loves; therefore let us exert all our efforts to fast and be ascetic so that we may go back to the paradise, from which we had been expelled because of our love of food.”

Mar Isaac said, “Fasting is the first step in God’s holy way. It is the reformer of all virtues, the beginning of struggle, the beauty of virginity, the upkeep of chastity, the father of prayer, the source of quietness, the teacher of silence and the announcer of blessings.” He also said, “God honored that weapon, which is fasting. Who can dare to despise it? **Since the Giver of the law Himself fasted, how can we, for whom the law was given, not fast?”**

St. Gregory of Cyprus said, “He, who is greedy for food, gets bad dreams. He, who does not eat much, is sober. As the weather gets dark with fog, so does the mind gets cloudy if the stomach is full of food.”

The Power of Fasting:

The best example, which shows the effectiveness of fasting, is that of the people of Nineveh. In spite of God’s threat to destroy the city after forty days, when He saw their fasting

and meekness, He forgave them. “God relented from the disaster that He has said He would bring upon them and He did not do it.” (Jonah 3:10)

Is it possible that God relents? Indeed, this is the result of fasting. Truly all the people of Nineveh had fasted, young and old. They, including the king, covered themselves with sackcloth and sat in ashes. Even the animals did not eat or drink. They all cried to the Lord Who forgave them. St. John Chrysostom comments on this event by saying, “God has honored fasting and granted anyone who honored it deliverance from death. Fasting is effective to such an extent that after the punishment of death was issued, it was removed not only for two, three, ten or twenty people, but for a whole nation like Nineveh.

After God spoke to Isaiah about the essence of fasting and its ideal method, He spoke about its blessings, its power and the promises associated with it. He said, **“Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.’”** (Isaiah 58:8-9) We need to meditate on each of these promises.

St. Jerome talking about Daniel, who shut the mouths of the lions by fasting, said, “How great is fasting! It tamed the lions and frightened the devils!” St. Augustine said, “Do you want your prayers to rise up to heaven? Let your prayers have two wings which are fasting and alms.”

C) WHY DO I FAST?

1. Much food stirs up desires:

There is a correlation between man's energy and his actions. For example, strong and forceful men, having more energy than they naturally need, have more tendency to get angry, kill and probably commit adultery more than those who are weak. They are more likely to use that energy in an outward activity. **It is known that man's energy is greatly related to the quality and quantity of the food he eats.**

The concept of fasting is based on that fact. It is a spiritual exercise intended to subdue the body in addition to limiting its nutrition. Hence, no great energy would result from the eaten food, which the individual might not be able to utilize properly. John Casian wrote, “When the stomach is full of all kinds of food, this gives rise to the seeds of immorality. You cannot direct and control your thoughts properly when the stomach is full of food.”

Drunkenness is not the only factor, which destroys the mind, but also the indulgence in eating. It takes away its power of clear thinking. The destruction of Sodom was not due to drunkenness only but also to the indulgence in food. The Lord rebuked Jerusalem saying, “This was the iniquity of your sister Sodom, fullness of food” (Ezekiel 16:49) Because of their fullness

of food, they were kindled with the lust of the flesh. St. Filex said, "Heavy foods vanquish the body members with desires."

2. Fasting is a strong bridle for the body:

It is a fact that the human being lives in a lusty troublesome body that craves for everything physical and material. This body strongly pulls the person down and makes him do things that he does not want to do. **"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish."** (Galatians 5:17) "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin, which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:19-24)

We thus need strong bridles to control the body and subdue it. **No doubt that the best bridle is fasting.** Our fathers, the saints, have experienced this and recorded their experiences. **Mar Isaac the Syrian said, "Every struggle against the body and its lust should start with fasting, especially if it concerns our inner sin."** St. Jerome said, "Our Lord God, the Creator, does not benefit from our empty stomachs, but this is a means to preserve our chastity." St. John Asuity said, **"Fasting to our desires is as water to fire."** One of the fathers said, "Be sure that the enemy attacks the heart when the stomach is full."

3. Fasting is the first step on the spiritual road:

The human being is made up of a body and a spirit. In as much as one of them dominates the other, the person becomes either spiritual or physical. If one wants to become spiritual, one has to overcome his body and bring it into subjection. Our Savior Jesus Christ has given us an example. After He had been baptized, He fasted forty days and nights. All those who want to walk in newness of life have to start the road of the spirit and the new life by fasting. St. Matthew wrote, "Then was Jesus led up **by the Spirit** into the wilderness." (Matthew 4: 1) In the wilderness, He fasted.

Mar Isaac the Syrian explains, "When our Lord began His ministry in the world, He started from this point. After He had been baptized, He was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness and fasted forty days and forty nights. All those who want to follow His steps have to start their struggle by fasting like Him."

St. John Casian said, "We cannot start the struggle with our inner person unless we get rid of the vice of gluttony. We have to prove first that we are freed from submitting to the body, "for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage." (2 Peter 2:19) St. Paul struggling according to the laws of the battle said, "Therefore I run thus, not with uncertainly. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1

Corinthians 9:26-27) St. Paul directed the main part of his struggle toward his body, and he made the result of the battle simply depend on subduing it.

We are not afraid of an outside enemy; our enemy is rather inside us. We fight every day an inner war. If we win, there is then no outside enemy as long as we conquer the inside one and subdue it to the authority of the spirit.

4. Fasting paves the way to virtues and gifts:

Since fasting is the starting point on the spiritual road, there is no doubt that **it prepares us for virtues. St. Felix said, “In as much as the body is ascetic, it has fellowship with the spirit. As long as the body is full of food, it pulls the soul down and ties the wings of its thoughts.** If it is empty, it submits to the will of the soul easily and the soul attracts it to everything it chooses.” He also said, “When any person sets on the way of righteousness, **he starts by fasting, for without asceticism all other virtues like prayer, thoughts and mind are not pure, and the inner man cannot be renewed.”**

In the early days, the holy books were written on dried animal skin. Likewise, if the soul is not dried with fasting and asceticism, God cannot write His word on it. Isaiah said, “Whom will He teach knowledge? And whom will He make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts?” (Isaiah 28:9) Who are those weaned from the milk and drawn from the breasts except those who have forsaken the love of the world and the flesh, overcoming the desires by fasting and asceticism?

The softest wind can lift up the bird’s feather as long as nothing is sticking to it. But if it is wet or dirt is sticking to it, the wind cannot lift it up. Likewise, the person who is tied up with physical desires cannot rise up spiritually to the heavenly matters through God’s grace, which visits us from time to time,

Jesus warns us saying, “Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and cares of this life.” (Luke 21:34) Likewise, when you throw a green plant in the fire. The fire does not inflame it right away, but it takes a while until the fire removes all the humidity. If the plant had been dry, the fire would have inflamed it right away.

Similarly, one may be regular in many spiritual ways, but still he complains of spiritual dryness and is not visited by God’s grace. **The fire of the divine love cannot inflame his heart unless he first gets rid of the desires of the body by fasting and other ascetic works.**

5. Fasting rectifies the body and trains the senses:

David, said, “I humbled myself with fasting.” (Psalms 35:13) St. Paul says, “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection.” (1 Corinthians 9:27) The expression “discipline” is usually used in revolutions. What does any nation do to control any revolution? It captures those who are revolting and puts them in prison. This is what fasting does. The body revolts. We capture the body and its senses by not giving them the things they desire. **Therefore, fasting is**

considered a period for rectifying the body by training its revolting senses with spiritual exercises. When you do not give the body food and drink within reason, it has to yield and submit to the spirit.

Summing up, fasting, besides its training to the body and senses, leads to the purity of the soul. St. John Casian said, “Our fathers experienced fasting everyday and found it useful, leading to the purity of the soul, and they ordered us not to have a full stomach, not even of simple bread or water.”

6. Fasting gives us will power:

Adam sinned because his will had weakened when confronted with outside temptations. Any person sins either because he is deceived by temptations, or his will weakens towards his desires and he knows before hand that he can not fight the temptations. Here comes the importance of the will power. **Fasting**, especially when skipping breakfast, **is one of the best means for strengthening the human will power.** When one fasts, he overcomes his desire for food and this leads him gradually to overcome temptations of all kinds.

D) HOW DO I FAST?

1. By controlling oneself:

The idea of fasting is based on the fact that it is not a goal in itself, but rather a means. St. John Casian said, “Fasting is important as a means which leads to purity of heart and not as a goal in itself.” One of the expressions of fasting in the Coptic language is, “controlling the inside.” meaning oneself.

This is the true understanding of fasting, as explained in the writings of the fathers. St. Felix said, “Anything placed on the table which you find that your eye desires, do not eat it. If your stomach gets used to that, it will not ask for anything more than its own needs.” He also said, “It is more suitable for you to eat meat without craving than to eat lentils with craving. We are not blamed when we eat food, but we are blamed if we eat it with craving, whether it is meat or beans.”

St. John Casian wrote, “Let us be confident that the outside fasting of food is enough for the purity of the heart and body, accompanied by the fasting of oneself. The self has harmful kinds of food that if it gets used to, would lead to hell. Anger, jealousy, envy, hatred, and slander, which is one of its favorite, are all kinds of food harmful to the self and lead to destruction. If we prevent ourselves with all our strength from eating these harmful kinds of food by a holy fast, then our physical fasting will be useful and fruitful.

The labor of the body, if accompanied by a broken spirit, presents an acceptable sacrifice to God, and builds storage for holiness that is very valuable inside the pure heart. **If the body**

only fasts and we are still bound to many sins and certain spiritual vices, then we will not benefit from subduing the body as long as a precious part in us is defiled. Therefore, when the outer man fasts, we should control also the inner man from harmful food. St. Paul urges us to present that inner man pure and holy to be worthy of receiving Christ inside us. “That Christ may dwell in your hearts” (Ephesians 3:17)

The easiest kind of fasting is that related to feeding the body. Although this has many advantages, it is also a means to practice the other kinds of fasting. How easy it is for a man to deprive himself of special kinds of food, yet how hard it is for him to prevent his mind from pondering on different thoughts. **Happy is the man who can do the fasting of the soul and the fasting of the mind, and then he can eat whatever he wants. No doubt, he will eat a spiritual food and feed on every word that comes out of the mouth of God. “My food is to do the will of My Father.”**

2. Humility:

We have mentioned that the main purpose of fasting is to control and refine the desires of the self; therefore, **repentance, sorrow, regret and humility should accompany fasting.** David, said, “As for me, when they were sick, My clothing was sackcloth; **I humbled myself with fasting.**” (Psalms 35:13)

St. Jerome said, “When the condition of the son of David became grave, after his sin of adultery, David repented by sitting in ashes. He said that he ate ashes like bread and mingled his drink with weeping (Psalms 102:9) and his knees were weak through fasting (Psalms 19:24). Though, Nathan, the prophet, had told him; “The Lord has put away your sin.” (2 Samuel 12:13)

God is pleased with the humility of a repentant soul. Isaiah says, “**Why have we fasted, say they, and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our soul, and You take no notice? In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness.** You will not fast as you do this day, To make your voice heard on high. **Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD?** (Isaiah 58:3-5)

God’s people understood the true meaning of fasting and knew how to get God’s mercy. **When the people of Nineveh repented,** “They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe; covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.” (Jonah 3:5-6)

God is pleased with such an affliction coming out of a repenting and broken soul. We notice that when Elijah told Ahab, the wicked king, all the catastrophes that would happen to him and his house, “He tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about mourning.” The Lord said to Elijah, “See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days; but in the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house.” (1 Kings 21:27-29)

Therefore, fasting is not only practiced during the times the church arranged by the guidance of the Holy Spirit but also in times of trouble, difficulties and tribulations. (2 Samuel 1:12; Daniel 6:18; 2 Samuel 12:16; Esther 4:16)

3. Fasting and the “Period of Abstinence”:

There is no fasting without a period of abstinence. All fasts must be practiced by abstaining from food for a period, and then one may eat food free from animal products. The period of abstinence is a foundation in fasting, whether in its meaning, its purpose, its exercise, or its results.

A Christian who eats breakfast at his regular time, then eats fasting food may think that he is fasting, but he has broken an important aspect of fasting, **“the period of abstinence.” Fasting is not only depriving oneself from certain kinds of food, but also has an element of hunger.** When our Lord fasted, the Bible says **“Afterward He was hungry.”** (Matthew 4:2) The book of Acts says, **“Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat.”** (Acts 10:9-10)

In the Old Testament, the period of abstinence in fasting was clear. When **Moses fasted, he did not eat or drink.** (Exodus 34:28) **In the book of Judges,** we find that abstinence was observed until the evening. **“Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening.”** (Judges 20:26) When God described to Ezekiel how to fast, He told him, **“And your food which you eat shall be by weight; from time to time you shall eat it. You shall drink also water by measure; from time to time you shall drink.”** (Ezekiel 4: 10-11) **In Nineveh’s fasting, the people did not taste anything.** (Jonah 3:7)

4. Moderation in fasting:

We have discussed in the last point the period of abstinence during fasting. We would like to say here that this practice is not obligatory to everyone. Fasting in Christianity, like any other spiritual exercise, is not an obligation. **The period of abstinence is not left to the believer to decide for himself, but by his spiritual father. We strongly emphasize that fasting may lead to bad consequences. The Church fathers have a famous advice in this issue, “Do not excessively weaken your body to the extent that your enemies laugh at you.”**

In fact, all the saints advised the moderation in fasting. St. Jerome wrote to Demitrias, the virgin, saying, **“No matter what, I do not want to oblige you to fast and abstain from food more than your capacity, for such exercise may easily weaken your body and cause physical illnesses rather than lead to a holy life.” Mar Isaac the Syrian said, “Beware not to exaggerate in fasting to the extent of weakening your body and becoming lazy and cold. Balance your life in the scale of knowledge.”**

The philosophers say that all virtues are mere means and an exaggeration is a vice. Do not exaggerate in fasting until you feel your heart will fail and you need others to help you or carry you. While you are subduing the desires of the body, you have to keep some physical

strength so that you may be able to read the Holy Scriptures, to sing the psalms and to keep awake. **Fasting, in itself, is not a complete virtue, but it is a foundation upon which other virtues can be built. It is a step towards the holy road.**

Again, fasting strenuously or without discrimination is not good; weakening the body may lead to the inability of the mind to control the thoughts. St. John Casian said, “We cannot apply one rule in fasting, for we do not all have the same physical strength. Fasting is not like the other virtues that can be developed by controlling the mind only, but it depends rather on the ability of the body.

There is a difference in the period of abstinence and the kind and amount of food according to the person’s age, sex and the condition of the body. In spite of that, there is one goal of fasting, which is subduing the body proportionately to the spiritual level and the ability of the mind to control the desires.”

If we have talked about moderation in fasting for those who are able, **what about those who are sick, the old, pregnant women or those who nurse their babies?** The fact that fasting is not a goal in itself has to be very clear. Those who have weak bodies can develop these virtues equal to those who fast strenuously. St. John Casian said, “The weakness of a body is not an obstacle toward a pure heart, on condition that the food he eats is not for enjoyment but for his sick body.”

The church organized the periods of abstinence; but the church also has the authority to excuse some members through the power given to the priests by our Lord Jesus Himself. That is to arrange their fasting in a special way to fit their spiritual levels and physical abilities.

5. Fasting and the kind of food:

There is a close correlation between the character of a person and the kind of food he eats. The German philosopher, Foyer Bach, said, “**The human being is what he eats,**” that is we can know a person’s habits and interests from the food he eats.

In addition to the period of abstinence from eating and drinking, **one must refrain from the kinds of food derived from animals and of their byproducts. The church received this tradition from the apostles. Again, the Lord said to Ezekiel, “Take for yourself wheat, barley, beans, millet, and spelt; put them in one vessel, and make bread of them for yourself. During the number of the days that you lie on your side.” (Ezekiel 4:9)**

St. Jerome wrote to Yostokhiom the virgin saying, “During Elijah’s escape from Isabel, when he was lying all alone and exhausted under the oak tree, the angel came and woke him up asking him to eat. He found by his head a cake and some water in a cruse. Could not God have sent him delicious wine, cooked food and broiled meat if He had wanted to? Also, Daniel could have eaten delicious food from the king’s table. He was called “A man of desires” because he refused to eat the desired food or drink the wine of lust.”

The kind of food during fasting is important. We cannot abstain from food then later eat whatever we want. This may cause a man to become greedier for food, so that he may resemble a lion that they keep hungry to become wilder in order to devour a man, as used to happen in the early ages. When we fast, we do not eat food from animals reproduced by lust. Fish, which is allowed during some fasts, is not reproduced by lust because fertilization occurs outside the body of the female.

6. Fasting does not weaken the body:

It is a must for us to discuss this point since it occupies the mind of many Christians that fasting does weaken the body and makes a person feel hungry quickly because fasting food lacks nutritional values. **Truly, we get hungry more quickly because we are carnal and our senses are centered in our bodies. When the stomach gets empty, we feel that quickly. However, a person who is busy with divine matters does not feel the hunger of the body so easily because the body is not the center of his attention. When the soul is filled, it can lift the body, too.**

How often we forget to eat without intending to fast when we are busy with an important matter in which our emotions and attentions are centered. **“I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness.”** (Psalms 63:4-5) Not only does the joy of the Lord satisfy the soul and makes it forget food, but it also makes us sorry for our sins. **“My heart is stricken and withered like grass, So that I forget to eat my bread.”** (Psalms 102:4)

When the soul is satisfied with God, it is elevated above food. Why? Because it does not have time for the works of the body. The spirit has pulled the body to work with it; therefore, the body does not have time for food. When the body is disciplined with spiritual work, it forgets its desires and the need of the stomach is subdued for a while. The food of the spirit fills the body as if it is a “spiritual body,” especially during that period. Solomon said, “A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb, But to a hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.” (Proverbs 27:7) Notice that he said, “a satisfied soul” and not body.

Hence when the soul is filled, the body is filled too, until it reaches a state of natural fasting wherein there is no feeling of hunger. It is fasting from physical food, for the soul and the body together are eating spiritual food. It is amazing that the carnal body eats spiritual food. Solomon said, “A good report makes the bones healthy” (Proverbs 15:30)

Poor is the man who makes his body fast, yet does not offer his soul its divine food that the body shares. Listen to what Joel said, “Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly” (Joel 2:15) A sacred assembly is an opportunity for prayer. Fasting and prayer both go together; that is why the church during the Holy Lent, repeats the words, “Fasting and prayer” in the fractions.

Our drawback, when we imitate the saints, is that we take some of the points in their lives, not their whole lives. Look at St. Paula and see how he was able to eat only half a loaf of bread daily, and how he continued like that for tens of years. He did not collapse while he was young and departed when he was very old.

How did the saints endure abstinence from food for several days? How were they able to fast and pray with bowing (Matanias) many times? The truth is that God's grace helped and supported them. Did God's grace help them in a miraculous way? Certainly not. We say that God's grace is a permanent help, both natural and miraculous! While the body is engaged in spiritual work, it eats from the food of the spirit.

The spirit can lift it up and give it a special strength different from that supplied by food. This is exactly what had happened with Daniel and the three young men; Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. In spite of the fact that they did not want to eat from the king's meat or drink from his wine and insisted on eating beans, at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the youth who ate a portion of the king's meat. (Daniel 1: 8-15)

Therefore, this matter needs faith in God's promises and the practice of spiritual work to help us in our physical struggle.

7. Fasting and spiritual exercises:

The saints built up their spiritual lives through exercise. "I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense towards God and men" (Acts 24:16) **Fasting is considered a preliminary step toward accomplishing spiritual exercises successfully.** The purpose of the spiritual exercise is for the soul to be accustomed to practicing specific virtues. However, if the body is uncontrollable, it is difficult to succeed in such exercises.

Hence, fasting which subdues the body and overcomes it, is an important exercise. Moreover, fasting helps in the success of other exercises. **The exercise of keeping silent is one of the best exercises on which one can train oneself during fasting.**

8. Prayer to accompany fasting:

The Lord said to His apostles, "This kind can come out by nothing but by prayer and fasting." (Mark 9:29) **This emphasizes the fact that prayer and fasting go together.** We read this fact in more than one place in the Holy Bible. The book of Acts says, "As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." **Then having fasted and prayed** and laid hands on them, they sent them away." (Acts 13:2-3). And when Paul and Barnabas had ordained priests in every church and **prayed with fasting**, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

St. Paul said to married couples, "Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to **fasting and prayer.**" (1 Corinthians 7:5)

Our holy fathers compared fasting to a fort and prayer to a weapon with which one fights from inside the fort. St. Augustine said, "The temple which Solomon built had two altars, one outside upon which the sacrifices were offered, and the other inside for the holies, that is, the altar of incense.

Likewise, any person who is a temple of the Holy Spirit, should have two altars: one within, which is the heart where the incense of prayer is offered, as the Lord said, “When you pray enter your closet, that is your heart.” The other altar is outside wherein the body is offered as a sacrifice through fasting and various types of piety.” St. Paul said, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.” (Romans 12:1)

The Song of Solomon said, “Who is this that comes out of the wilderness Like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense?” (Song 3:6) This verse refers to the soul coming out of the wilderness of this world, victorious by the grace of the Savior Whom it loved. It is a soul perfumed with myrrh, referring to fasting, and frankincense, referring to prayer. But is myrrh a perfume? Why did the spirit say that the soul is perfumed with myrrh? Indeed, fasting and piety are truly beautiful perfumes that remove the bad odor of sin and bring the nice odor of Christ.

In our spiritual life, fasting and prayer cannot be separated. If we compare fasting to the flaming charcoal, prayer would be the frankincense. Both of them compliment one another. When both are united, the result is a nice aroma that perfumes the soul.

9. Fasting and giving alms:

The Lord clarified in His sermon on the mountain, the three basic factors in Christian worship: prayer, fasting, and giving alms. **As prayer accompanies fasting, so do alms, in order for the fasting to be acceptable.** The Lord made this clear through His speech to Isaiah about acceptable fasting, “Is not this the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Isaiah 58:6-7) When God talked about Sodom’s sin, He mentioned besides the fullness of bread (neglecting fasting), that it did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. (Ezekiel 16:49)

10. Fasting and marital relations:

Since fasting is an important factor in subduing the desires of the body, it has, therefore, to be honored by keeping the body pure. The church forbids marital relations during all periods of fasting and considers them non-fasting. Since anyone who is fasting abstains from food that is essential for life, likewise he should abstain from marital relations that are not essential for life, as compared to food.

Avoiding marital relations goes side by side with fasting and agrees with the spirit of asceticism. This does not mean that marital relations are a defiling act, but they are not considered fasting. Avoiding them is like avoiding food, just for temperance. It is written in the Bible, **“Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber And the bride out of her dressing room.”** (Joel 2:15-

16) Avoiding marital relations during fasting periods has to be done upon the consent of both husband and wife so that neither of them would deviate or bring a sin upon himself or upon the other. This is what St. Paul advised. (1 Corinthians 7:5)

E) ADVICE AND GUIDELINES

1. The exercise of fasting is an interesting training, but we emphasize that you should consult your spiritual father to set limits for the period of abstinence.

2. Fasting is not meant to weaken the body but to subdue it. The body is a gift that you must take care of. Also a sane mind is in a healthy body.

God asked us to overcome the body, not to kill it. The church permits old people, babies, pregnant and nursing mothers, the sick, the weak, young children and those with special circumstances not to abstain from food during fasting periods. The body is the vehicle by which you cross the wilderness of this world. Do not be permissive to your body to the point of becoming enslaved to it, nor be harsh to it to the extent of becoming unable to continue the road. “Let all things be done decently and in order.”(1 Corinthians 14:40)

3. What has been written in this book about fasting is written for everyone; for people with different spiritual levels and various health conditions. Therefore, do not try to apply everything you have read, regardless of your health condition, your spiritual level and the effort you exert at work. Remember St. Paul’s words, “For I say through the grace given to me, to every man who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to each one the measure of faith.” (Romans 12:3)

Spiritual life is not imitation of others. It needs a long gradual struggle. It is good to be eager to imitate the saints, however, it is good to be wise and sober. Do not look to the end of their lives after they have struggled for a long time, but rather to the beginning of their struggle, and imitate that.

4. The sick and the weak are special cases. St. Bersnofios answered one of his sick disciples who was suffering because of his inability to fast saying, “**Fasting is meant to subdue the body. So if the body is already subdued by sickness, then the goal of fasting has been achieved.**”

5. Never give excuses that you are unable to fast. Do not let your body deceive you by pretending it is weak, or might become weak by fasting. The contrary is true; fasting gives manpower and energy and prevents many causes that may shorten one’s life. Most of the

vegetarians live very long. St. Jerome said, “It is better that your stomach gets sick and not your soul. It is better that your knees tremble than your purity is shaken. Therefore, subdue and enslave your body so that you may not be shamed.”

St. John Casian said, “It is astonishing that though we take good care of our health and eat delicious, nutritional food, and walk in the fresh air, we are still susceptible to many diseases. Whereas the saints, who subdued their bodies by continuous prayer and fasting, are more healthy. While our bodies, which are taken good care of, rot and give off bad smell after death, the saints’ bodies, which are neglected and subdued, remain perfumed with a good smell even after death.”

6. Do not desire specific kinds of food while fasting. There are many delicious kinds of food but their nutritional value is very little. On the other hand, there are other kinds of food, not as tasty, yet they are very nutritious. Do not seek enjoyment in the food you eat, but rather select what is nutritious for your body.

Many people prepare a variety of tasty kinds of food during fasting, not less than the variety prepared when they are not fasting. **Fasting has to be observed with piety and mortification.** Treat your body as if you are a doctor to a sick person. Give your body what is beneficial even if it does not like it.

7. Mingle your physical fasting with another kind of fasting by exercising your senses to fast from sin and evil; specially anger, passing judgement and lust.

8. Mingle your fasting with meditation, thinking of the occasion for fasting. For example, during the Holy Lent, remember your Lord Jesus when He, the Holy and Righteous, fasted forty days and forty nights. On Wednesdays, remember when Judas betrayed his Lord and ask yourself if you betray Jesus and for how much? Whenever you commit sin, you betray Him. You, who had been sanctified with His blood and made vows to Him, remember your betrayal to Him and repent. When you fast on Fridays, remember the Savior’s sufferings for you. Think of what your sins have caused to your Lord Jesus Christ, and be sorry for them, and so on.

9. If you want your fasting to be acceptable, present it free of evil and hypocrisy. The scribes and Pharisees used to fast, but the Lord did not accept their fasting because of their hypocrisy. (Luke 18:9-14) “Thus said the LORD to His people: “They have not restrained their feet. Therefore the LORD does not accept them; He will remember their iniquity now, And punish their sin. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine and by pestilence.” (Jeremiah 14:10-12) **Incense when mingled with dirt, loses its nice aroma; likewise, God does not delight with fasting which is accompanied by sin.**

F) FASTS OF THE COPTIC CHURCH

1. The oldest and most important fasts of the Coptic church are Holy Lent, the Passion Week, Wednesdays and Fridays. These were mentioned in the Canons of the Apostles and by St. Basil the Great and others. The church was very strict in implementing these fasts to the extent that it used to punish those who did not fast them without acceptable excuses. These three fasts are concerned with occasions related to the Lord Jesus Himself.

The Holy Lent is a commemoration of the forty days and forty nights that Jesus fasted. Wednesdays commemorate His betrayal; Fridays commemorate His crucifixion, and the Passion Week commemorates His suffering. We notice that the Holy Lent is put apart from the Holy Week.

2. The Apostles' fast is one of the oldest since the Apostles themselves fasted it. It is written in the Didache that in the past, they fasted one week for the descent of the Holy Spirit, then they further fasted one or two more weeks. But in our days, the Apostles' fast is not limited to a certain number of days, for it always ends on Abib 5; July 12, which is the feast of the commemoration of the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul. It does not start on a fixed day for it depends on when the day of Pentecost is, which in turn varies according to Easter.

3. The rest of the fasts in the Coptic Church are:

- A) The Advent,** fasting before Christmas, which is 43 days long starting November 25 (Hatour 16) and ends on Christmas, January 7 (Kiahk 29).
- B) Nineveh's fast,** (Jonah) which is three days long, to commemorate the repentance of the people of Nineveh. It starts two weeks before the Holy Lent.
- C) St. Mary's fast** is fifteen days long always ending on August 22 (Misra 16), the feast of the assumption of her body to heaven.
- D) The day before Christmas and the day before Epiphany (Baramon):** Christians used to abstain from food these two days to prepare themselves to receive the blessings of the feasts.

4. The above mentioned fasts differ in their rituals, the period of abstinence and in the kinds of food. No fish is to be eaten during the Holy Lent, the day before Christmas and Epiphany. The same applies to Wednesdays and Fridays. The custom of the early church during the Passion Week was to abstain from food followed by eating bread and salt only. The weak were allowed to eat but have no desserts. Fish is allowed in the rest of the fasts.

5. The period of abstinence used to be until sunset during the Holy Lent, until 3:00 p.m. during the rest of the fasting days. However, we advise that the period of abstinence be determined by the spiritual father according to each person's physical health and spiritual state.

6. There is no period of abstinence on Saturdays and Sundays during the whole year except for the Saturday before Easter when Jesus was in the sepulchre. There is no fasting at all during the fifty days after Easter. This is the only period when there is no fasting even on Wednesdays and Fridays. Fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays is not allowed if they coincide with a feast for Jesus Christ like Christmas or Epiphany.

7. Matanias (worshipping while bowing) go along with fasting, but when fasting is not allowed, this kind of worship is not allowed either; such as, during the fifty days after Easter, on feasts for the Lord Jesus and on Saturdays and Sundays. Matanias are allowed during the rest of the year.