



In the Days of the Fast

Contempt and Condemnation

Many times during the fasting period we try to explain the meaning of our fast. But it appears that we forget to look to our Tradition, Holy Scripture and the liturgy. Just before Great Lent begins we read at the Divine Liturgy from the Epistle to the Romans, where the best meaning of the fast is given.

“The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand,” (Romans 14: 3-4).

Every other interpretation after these words is insufficient, for more than enough is said in just these few verses. Holy Scripture tells us that the one who does not fast should not show contempt towards the one who does, and the one who fasts should not judge the one who does not. With these verses the Apostle Paul indicates that most important is our mutual respect and fellowship amongst ourselves and not divisions or conflict. At the same time, the fast shouldn’t elevate us above others and fill us with some sort of pride, but on the contrary – to free us of the feeling of pride and sufficiency. The Christian ascetic St. Isidore speaks of this truth in the following manner:

“If you fast regularly, do not be inflated with pride, but if you think highly of yourself because of it, then you had better eat meat. It is better for a man to eat meat than to be inflated with pride and to glorify himself.”

St. Matthew’s Gospel, Chapter 25

In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, chapter 25, we see Christ as He judges man. In so doing He divides the people to the left and right. To one He grants the Kingdom of God and to the others damnation.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

Therefore, Christ says those who are worthy of the Kingdom are those who fed Him when He was hungry, gave Him to drink when He was thirsty, visited Him when He was in prison. For when they did it to one



person they did it to Christ. Christ shows that the question at the end of the world, at the Last Judgment, will not be how much we fasted, but how much we helped our neighbor. Does this mean that the Orthodox mistakenly give such importance to fasting? Does it mean that the fast is not important? I think the answer to both questions is negative. What Christ points out in His teaching is that fasting is certainly not the goal in and of itself, a goal for us to strive towards, and when we achieve it we can feel better and greater than other people. Fasting is a means on our path of being better Christians, of being free to love. Denying ourselves certain foods makes us free, and freedom is the prerequisite for true love. The fast is not a goal in and of itself, but an aid in perfecting our lives. If we understand the fast in this way we will certainly not be prideful, nor will we judge those who do not fast. On the contrary, the point is for us to love, to attain greater freedom from our stomachs and the urges for food, and thus to attain humility and love.

Identity

In today's era of globalization when there is a desire to be one, for us to lose our particularities and our identity as a people and community, we approach the Fast in the tradition of our Orthodox Church. In our Church, Great Lent has existed from the very beginning of Christianity. This means that it has existed in the Orthodox mindset for 2,000 years and our Church has never renounced it. The Jewish people, who suffered greatly in the last century, understand the significance of identity and distinctiveness. In spite of all the sufferings – or, perhaps because of them – the Jewish people point to their distinctiveness more today than ever before. One of the ways in which they do so is through food. Religious Jews have much respect for the dietary rules they inherited from the Old Testament and they adhere to them to this very day. If you find yourself in America do not be surprised to find that many restaurants and grocery stores place special certificates signed by local rabbis which guarantee that the food prepared is “according to the rules“ of the Jewish diet. Adhering to these rules, for the Jews, is nothing but an issue of preserving their identity by which they present themselves as a special nation. For us every sort of food is permitted and everything is eaten, the fast is only a period of time when we abstain from one kind of food. We can even say that the Fast is a period when we can best grasp and value meat and dairy products. For when we eat meat and dairy products on a daily basis we stop valuing them. Only from that moment when we deny ourselves of them do we properly understand their goodness. This is the case with many other things. Therefore, the fast is not a time when we detest a certain kind of food, but when we value more that which we have. At the same time, the fast is that which separates us from other Christians – it demonstrates our distinctiveness. We do not stress this so that we might come into conflict with others, but showing our distinctiveness we show the beauty in our differences before the world, before others. Why should we be ashamed of that? Why would we renounce that? Why would we undervalue that?

Concern and care for others

During His earthly life Christ never showed hatred towards sinners, nor did He in any way reject them. This, however, was not the case with hypocrites, with those who say one thing but do another. For this reason we see in Matthew's gospel the words of Christ:

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will



reward you. (Matt. 6:16-18).

We don't fast for others, to prove anything to anyone else. His words here are more than clear. The fast does not close us up to ourselves; it's not an escape from the world, not the turning of our backs to others. Early Christianity showed another dimension of this PODVIG, which was turning to others. Fasting is a PODVIG, it's a movement of freedom in ourselves. It isn't a ban in and of itself, where we are forbidden to eat this or that or else God will punish us. It is the voluntary giving up of certain foods so that we might attempt to live freely, to show that man doesn't live by bread alone (Matt. 4:4). Man is something more! As an icon of God he freely chooses what he will base his life upon. As Orthodox Christians we choose to base our lives on freedom and love. The fast is the means that teaches us about us. We freely choose to not eat a particular kind of food for one specific period of time. Doing this we do not consider ourselves to be better than others nor do we judge those who do not fast as we do. And so we practice love and respect for others and their weaknesses in the same way Christ loved and respected sinners.

How did early Christians see fasting? I will cite a few quotes from that period. The early Christian text The Shepherd of Hermas tells us that the goal of fasting is in saving funds so that later we might use it to help the poor. Origen quotes non-existent words of Christ, "Blessed is he who fasts, that thereby he may feed the poor." In his description of Christians to Emperor Hadrian, Aristides wrote that the Christians fast two or three days a week so that they might have food for the needy. All of this shows us how our PODVIG is spread so that we might be closer and dedicate ourselves more to our neighbor. This time is an opportunity for us as well to remember those in need, but also those with whom we are in conflict. We need to try and do something in that area. Perhaps we might not reach peace and rebuild our relationships, but at least we think of it, remembering that there is also something that gives us no peace, which is the rupture of our relationship with our others.

Conclusion

All of us make up the Church together, gathered together in Christ in His Body. We shouldn't look at fasting only through the rules of what we can or cannot eat, it is sufficient to simply say when we fast we don't eat meat products. Everything else is a matter of various rules (Typicon) that were mostly written in monastic communities, which, again, have their own regime of life. Essentially we abstain from foods that come from animals and we eat in moderation. In other words, even if we don't eat foods from animals, and we continue to overeat – our fasting is in vain. Here we should bear in mind that today most products seem as if they come from animals, but they are chemical products and not animal (milk powder, milk proteins, etc.). Again, the essence is not in sorting but in placing certain borders, based on our ability.

Through the fast we return our self-confidence and the strength of freedom, that is, we show to ourselves that we are not dependent on meat, milk...we can do without that – we are freed from these foods, our dependence which makes us slaves (smoking, drinking)... We will be proud of ourselves since we have risen above the necessity of food and the needs animals are subject to. Fasting is in no way an excuse for us to judge others because we're not doing it for others, but ourselves. We are the ones who need the fast; God doesn't need our pasulj or green beans.... It's unfortunate when people believe that God needs our fast, they'll go as far as to use their fasting to judge those who are not fasting. It's unfortunate to see people go through all the ingredients of everything they buy lest they find one non-lenten ingredient, yet they



won't deny themselves of that which they are truly dependent upon such as cigarettes, alcohol, swearing, overeating, pride –the list goes on. The fast must make us free, freedom from dependence (eating, smoking, drinking), freedom from judging others, freedom from hatred, the freedom to love others.

It is fitting to quote the ascetic Theodore and his beautiful message which applies to us today: “We are saved neither through asceticism, nor vigils, nor any other kind of suffering but true humility, which is – love.”

There was once an ascetic who cast demons out. He asked the demons, “What should I do for you to leave? Should I fast?” They replied, “We neither eat, nor drink!” “Should I keep vigils?” They replied, “We do not sleep!” “Should I leave the world?” They replied: “We live in the deserts!” “Well then what shall I do that you leave?” They replied, “Nothing defeats us but humility.” St. Theodore concludes: “Do you not see how humility is victorious against the demons?”

Let us not forget that the devil is a bodiless being who neither eats nor drinks. In this way we could even say that the devil in the desert keeps the complete fast (in respect to food), he eats nothing (which is more than when we fast on water). But it is of no use to him, for he still remains the devil. It is unfortunate if when we fast instead of becoming more Christlike we resemble the devil who also fasts but judges others and is filled with all evil.

Every fast is an opportunity for us to correct our old mistakes, to build new paths and go down the path of progress in Christ!