



What about Meat and Dairy Substitutes During Great Lent?



As we approach Great Lent every year, there seems to be a rush of interest in finding good fasting recipes that are fast, easy and nutritious. More and more often, those recipes seem to include some kind of soy or other vegetable product that has been processed to look and function like meat or dairy products. As these substitute products make their appearance, it seems that the question of whether or not this is “cheating” seems to arise. After all when one can make a “veggieburger” with soy “cheese” for lunch, how is that different from a trip to the fast food restaurant? In order to understand how these vegetable meat and dairy replacements fit into our fasting diet, it is necessary to take a step back and understand (at least in part) why we abstain from meat.

St. Basil the Great, in his great work on the creation, the Hexameron, gives us some insight into the close relationship of the soul to the blood of an animal. Commenting on Lev 17:11 he says, “... according to Scripture, ‘the life of every creature is in the blood,’ as the blood when thickens changes into flesh, and the flesh when corrupted decomposes into earth ... see the affinity of the soul with blood, of blood with flesh, of flesh with earth.” (Homily VIII.2.) This is important to us in fasting because the meat which we eat, the flesh of the animals, is closely associated with the bestial soul. The soul, whether in beasts or in men, is the seat of the will and desire, the feelings and emotion, and the intellect. There is a frequently found belief among primitive cultures that a hunter or warrior can acquire the characteristics of his prey or foe by consuming his flesh. Because of this close link between the flesh and the blood and the blood and the soul, it becomes more apparent that by consuming the flesh of animals, we “commune”, as it were, with their bestial passions and will. From nature we see this same process in the nurture of young by the mother through nursing. The mother not only gives her young the physical nutrients required, but by sharing the product of her own body, she communicates to them the characteristics of her nature. By abstaining from meat and dairy, during the fast we abstain from this “communion” with the beasts in order that we might weaken the bestial passions of our fallen nature in order that the temptations and urges that arise from them might also be more easily resisted and overcome.

With this in mind, let us then turn back to the question of meat and dairy substitutes. These substitutes are usually the refinement of plant proteins (usually derived from soy or wheat gluten) which have been then processed into shapes and textures which are similar to meat products that are part of our regular diet. It is not the shape and consistency of meat that links us to the bestial passions, but rather it is the link to the



blood of the animal and thus to its soul. Because these meat substitutes consist of plant material (and plants do not have a soul and thus do not communicate to us passions by their nature), they are not the same as meat, despite their appearance and texture. It is simple to see then that there is no essential objection to using these plant based meat substitutes.

The question for us, however remains; what, then is the reason for all this processing and shaping of this plant material to resemble meat and other animal products? One of the reasons for this is that our habits of cooking and preparing food are based on the use of animal proteins. By using these meat and dairy substitutes, we do not have to completely revamp our kitchens and recipes. Basically we are speaking here about ease of preparing food and the convenience of using the cooking techniques which are familiar to us. In the fast paced world in which we live, this convenience gives us the ability to more easily meet all the demands of our lives which do not lessen just because it is a fasting season. By having these products for our convenience, we are able on one hand to cut ourselves off from the influence of the bestial soul and on the other to continue to meet our obligations.

Similar to the above noted aspect of convenience, there is also the reason that for many households, especially in the western culture, there is a lack of knowing how to prepare healthy meals without using meat. These meat and dairy substitutes allows the average cook to be able to prepare fasting meals without having to sacrifice nutrition.

In both of the above examples, the spiritual benefit of convenience and of relief from learning new cooking techniques are important. If we had to restructure our whole lives just to comply with the dietary requirements of the fast, then a large part of our time and energy would be consumed in this effort rather than being invested in the increased spiritual labors of Great Lent. Of course, this presumes that we do indeed increase our spiritual labors – increased prayers both public and private, reading spiritual books and articles, increasing works of righteousness and so on. Here is where we begin to see perhaps a reason to avoid the meat and dairy substitutes. If you are not going to increase your spiritual labors, then there is really no benefit in the convenience and ease provided by using these food products. Better to have invested the time and energy in focusing on cooking Lenten foods and the work of revamping the kitchen than to waste the time saved from those efforts in pursuing our regular worldly activities. Another related problem is expressed in the patristic recommendation that during the fast we should eat less in quantity and the money that we save can be given to the poor. When we pay premium prices for meat and dairy substitutes and then overeat, not only is there no savings, but we spend more for food than during non-fasting times.

There is another reason for using meat and dairy substitutes that is less desirable. It is that these substitutes allow us to eat tastier and more pleasing foods during the fast. That is self defeating; it is not helpful to cut oneself off from one source of temptation (the bestial soul) on one hand, only to cater to our temptations of gluttony and love of pleasure on the other. It is better to eat bland simple foods without expensive meat and dairy substitutes than to use those products to prepare tasty and palate pleasing dishes.

The use of meat and dairy substitutes are not in and of themselves a spiritual problem – they are simply plant-based foods processed into new external forms but with not essential change. Spiritually, eating a “veggie burger” is no different from eating its component vegetables. The danger of these meat and dairy substitutes is in how we use them. If we use them to free up time and energy to pursue increased spiritual labor, then this is consistent with the fast. If, on the other hand, we use these things to provide an



opportunity to feed other passions and waste the time gained in frivolous pursuits, then we would be better not to use them. It is necessary to look into one's own soul, and where there is any doubt, to ask your confessor how to proceed. The purpose of Great Lent is to provide an opportunity for increased self-denial and to weaken the passions that assault us from all sides. These meat and dairy substitutes are tools for use in that effort. If they help us in that effort, then they can be used. If, on the other hand, they stand as barriers to our spiritual development, they must be set aside.