

## The Purpose of the Great Fast

Although our time has brought with it many changes in church laws, traditions, and discipline, and the Second Vatican Council has relaxed the rules for fasting, including the Great Fast, nevertheless, the Forty Days Fast still has significance for our spiritual life. For various reasons, today we may be unable to fast in the same way as our ancestors did; yet even today we are obliged to a spiritual fast — that is, we are obliged to refrain from sin, and from giving in to our evil inclinations. We are also obliged to pray and to practice virtue and good deeds. In reality then, the most important goal of the Great Fast is our spiritual renewal.

In the last chapter we discussed the institution and duration of the Great Fast, now we shall speak about its purpose as recorded in three different periods of history:

### Apostolic Times:

For the Apostles and First Christians, the day of the Jewish Pasch was a sorrowful day commemorating the death of Jesus Christ, therefore, they celebrated this day with prayer, contrition and fasting. This association of the Pasch with fasting lasted a long time. Even in the second century one may find the word "Pasch" used to denote "fasting". This practice seems to echo the time when the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ took place on one and the same day. This association of the sad event of Christ's death with the joyful event of His resurrection has left its traces in our Great Saturday services in which the Lenten service is merged with the resurrection service.

### The Paschal Fast and the Catechumenate:

The third and fourth centuries witnessed the greatest flourishing of the catechumenate. Catechumens were those who were being prepared for the sacrament of Baptism. This preparation extended over a period of three years and terminated solemnly during the Great Fast. The concluding acts of this preparation were: the giving of a name to the catechumen at the beginning of the Great Fast, an exorcism of evil spirits which took place daily throughout the whole Lenten period, the last instructions in the truths of the holy faith, the final examination and then, the Baptism itself which took place on Great Saturday. Some of these acts were incorporated into the daily service.

To become a Christian and a member of the Church through Baptism was regarded as an important event in the life of the newly-baptized and in the life of the Church. For this reason, this joyful event was usually celebrated on the great feasts of the Pasch (Resurrection), Pentecost or the Theophany. In the third century, the rite of baptism was associated above all with the feast of the Pasch. The catechumens prepared themselves for baptism by fasting and prayer. Under the influence of the catechumenate the pre-paschal fast was extended to forty days. As time went on, the rest of the faithful also began to observe this fast together with the catechumens. St. Justin the Martyr (fl67) speaks about this custom of the faithful observing the fast together with the catechumens. He says that those who embraced the Christian faith "were taught to implore God by fasting and prayer for the forgiveness of past sins, and we pray and fast together with them." (Apol. 1,61)

### The Great Fast — An Endeavor of Soul and Body:

The institution of the catechumenate contributed not only to the extension of the Great Fast to forty days, but also to the fact that, in time, all the faithful adopted this fast so that it became the pre-paschal fast for the whole Church. Later, when the institution of the catechumenate lost some of its meaning, the Forty Days Fast became an independent ritual. Today, it is observed by the faithful as a time for special prayer, fasting and penance, and as a spiritual preparation for the feast of the Pasch (Resurrection). This attitude of the Church finds its most beautiful expression in our Lenten services, customs and practices. We shall mention certain ones here.

a.) *Lenten Services:*

The Lenten services differ from the ordinary church services in that they include more prayers, more psalms and more readings, especially from the Old Testament. During Lenten services the entire Psalter is read twice a week. Predominant throughout these services is the spirit of penance and sorrow for sins. The Lenten sticheras in Vespers and Matins either lament the fall of man into sin, summon us to penance and sorrow, extol the benefits of fasting and good works, or inspire us to master our senses and to practice virtue. "Let us fast in a manner pleasing and acceptable to God," says one of the stichera of the aposticha in the Vespers of the first Monday, "genuine fasting is alienating oneself from evil, restraining the tongue, putting aside hatred, parting company with concupiscence, falsehood and the breaking of oaths, — abstaining from all these things is real fasting." In the aposticha of Matins of the first Monday, we sing: 'The fast has arrived, the mother of purity, the discoverer of sins, the preacher of penance, the companion of the Angels and the salvation of man: Let us, the faithful, cry out: O God, have mercy on us.'

b.) *Lenten Penances and Prostrations:*

In the first centuries of Christianity the practice of public penance for various sins and offences prevailed in the Church. Following the wishes of the Church, many penitents performed their penance during the Great Fast. Just as the faithful adopted the Forty Days Fast from the catechumens, so too, under the influence of Church discipline they began to regard themselves as penitents and to perform various penitential acts during the Great Fast. From this stems the profound penitential spirit of our Lenten services.

Closely connected with our Lenten services are inclinations. These inclinations are made either by bowing from the waist or to the ground (the low, profound bow or prostration), and they are performed at all Lenten services from Monday through Friday.

The prayer of St. Ephrem (f373) with accompanying prostrations merits special consideration. This prayer, repeated at every Lenten service, can be regarded the official Lenten penitential prayer of our Church, expressing, as it does, the whole content and purpose of the Great Fast. We give it here in its entirety:

"O Lord and Master of my life, drive  
from me the spirit of discouragement,  
negligence, ambition and idle talk. (*Prostration*)

"Grant me, your servant, the spirit of  
chastity, humility, patience and charity. (*Prostration*)

"Yes, my Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins,  
and not judge my brother, for you are blessed forever,  
and ever. Amen." (*Prostration*)

The Kievan Metropolitan George (1073) in his "Rules" for priests and laity prescribes for all the faithful to make three hundred prostrations daily during the Forty Days Fast.

*c.) The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts:*

A typical Lenten service is the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. Already in the first centuries there was a custom during the Forty Days Fast to omit the celebration of the Divine Liturgy because, at that time, it was still linked with agape, that is the love banquet, and this was not in keeping with the spirit of fasting. Furthermore, the Divine Liturgy was regarded as a joyful mystery; for this reason, its celebration was limited to Saturday and Sunday. On the other days of the week, to give the faithful an opportunity to receive Holy Communion, the Divine Liturgy was replaced by other services, from which the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts developed in time. Actually, this is not a Liturgy in the sense of the word, for it does not have the consecration of bread and wine; but rather, it is a Vespers service combined with the rite of Holy Communion, for which the bread was previously consecrated. Hence the name of Presanctified Gifts.

The Council of Laodicea (c. 364) prescribed: "It is not permitted during the Great Fast to offer up the Bread (that is the Holy Liturgy), except on Saturday and Sunday" (rule 49). The Sixth Ecumenical Council of Trullo (691) decreed: "On all the days of the Great Fast, with the exception of Saturday and Sunday, and the feast of the Annunciation, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts must be celebrated." (rule 52).

When the zeal of the first Christians gradually began to diminish and the custom of daily and frequent Holy Communion was abandoned, the Great Fast became also the time of preparation for a worthy reception of Holy Communion on the feast of the Pasch.

*d.) Lenten Sermons:*

In former times, the faithful attended services even twice a day during the Great Fast. At these services, sermons were delivered. St. Basil the Great, during one week in lent, delivered in nine homilies a series of beautiful discourses on the "Hexameron" that is, on the six days of the creation of the world. It was then that he preached twice a day in the morning and in the evening. He has left us two beautiful discourses on the meaning and benefits of fasting.

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