

Spiritual Theology Part 3



Fasting

Saint Mina Coptic Orthodox Church
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Fasting?

- Protestants neglect fasting & do not encourage people to fast.
- They consider fasting a human work & since to them good works do not play any role in salvation; they have not emphasized the importance & the benefits of fasting.
- It is not uncommon to find people in their 50s or 60s who have not fasted a single day!

Fasting in the Coptic Church

- When we fast, we abstain from food & water for a certain period of time as determined through the guidance of the father in confession according to one's spiritual level & health condition.
- Generally, the abstinence period ends at 3pm because at this hour [the 9th hour] Christ died on the cross & saved us.
- After the end of the abstinence period, we break our fast & only eat vegetarian food, however, since we fast more than half the days of the year, the Church has allowed the congregation to eat fish during certain fasting periods.

Q1: Our Lord said that fasting should be “in secret” (Mt 6:18) so shouldn’t fasting be left to the individual to decide when to fast?

- **A1: Our Lord also said that prayer should be “in secret” (Mt 6:6) yet we still go to church on set days & pray as a congregation.**
- **Praying in secret does not contradict congregational prayers.**
- **Likewise, set seasons for congregational fasting do not contradict the commandment of fasting in secret.**
- **Moreover, even if the fasting seasons are set, the depth of each one’s fasting & the personal periods of abstinence can remain in secret.**

Biblical examples of congregational fasting:

- The whole congregation fasted together & God accepted their fast (**Esther 4**).
- Everybody in Nineveh fasted together (**Jonah 3**).
- Congregational fasting is obvious from the words of Joel the Prophet, ***“Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation...”*** (Joel 2:15)
- St. Paul fasted with all the people on the ship (**Acts 27:21**).
- The apostles fasted together (**Acts 13:2,3**).
- The principle of having set dates for fasting has its origins in Holy Scripture, ***“The fasting of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, & the fast of the tenth ...”*** (Zech 8:19)

Q2: What are the times of fast in the Coptic Church?

- **A2: The Coptic Church fasts over half the days of the year:**
- The Advent fast that ends with the Holy Nativity feast (43 days in length / fish allowed)
- Jonah's fast (3 days / no fish allowed)
- The Great Lent that ends with the Holy Resurrection feast (55 days in length / no fish allowed)
- The Apostles fast that ends with the feast of martyrdom of Sts Paul & Peter (length varies / fish allowed)

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- St. Mary's fast that ends with the feast of the assumption of her body (14 days / fish allowed)
- Every Wednesday & Friday except during the fifty days after the Holy Resurrection (no fish allowed)
- commemorates the plotting of the Jews to crucify our Savior on Wednesday & the crucifixion on Friday.
- During the fasts where fish is allowed, it is allowed only on all days except Wednesday & Friday.
- Moreover, on Saturday & Sunday there is no period of abstinence from food.

Q3: What is the wisdom behind eating vegetarian food only after the period of abstinence?

- **A3: The vegetarian food was the diet that God had prepared for Adam & Eve (Gen 1:29) they also continued to eat it even after the sin (Gen 3:18).**
- **God did not allow man to eat meat except after the flood (Gen 9:3) & when God saved the Israelites from Pharaoh's bondage, & gave them the manna (Num 11: 7,8)**
- **He only gave them meat to eat after they complained against Him (Num 11:33) & with meat He struck them & killed many of them.**
- **Thus we conclude that the vegetarian food was the original diet for humans & that it is recommended as a means of asceticism not because other foods are unclean but in order to discipline our bodies.**

Q4: Why does the Church allow us to eat fish on certain fasts?

- **A4: Since the fasting periods are lengthy, the Church has decided to allow her children to eat fish to supplement their diet with a protein source [on certain fasts] if they elect to do so.**
- **We notice that fish was the preferred meal for our Lord Jesus Christ during His Incarnation (John 21:9).**

Q5: Is fasting part of Christian worship or is it only in the Old Testament?

- **A5: There are many biblical verses that proves that fasting is indeed expected from every Christian:**
- • Our Lord said, *“...do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”* (Mt 6:18)
- **Thus fasting is expected from Christians & there is also a heavenly reward if we fast according to God’s will.**
- Our Lord said about His disciples & those who believe their teachings, *“The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, & then they will fast.”* (Mt 9:15) – an indication that fasting is expected from Christians.

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- Our Lord said, “This kind can come out by nothing except by prayer & fasting.” (**Mk 9:29**)
- explicit message that without fasting we cannot overcome in our spiritual struggles.
- Christ Himself fasted 40 days & 40 nights (**Mt 4:2; Mk 1:12; Lk 4:1**).
- We read about St. Paul saying “...in hunger & thirst, in **fastings often ...**” (**2 Cor 11:27**) “in labors, in sleeplessness, in **fastings ...**” (**2 Cor 6:5**) & the rest of the apostles fasted as well (**Acts 14:23; 13:3**).
- St. Paul exhorts the married people “give yourselves to **fasting & prayer**” (**1 Cor 7:5**).

The Spiritual Benefits & Blessings of Fasting

1- Fasting controls the body & the will

- ➔ St. Paul says “But I discipline my body & bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27)
- ➔ With the same will that controls food, one can control the other voluntary behavior, e.g. talking, thinking, & feelings.

2- Repentance: Fasting is not only abstaining of food, but also sins. As clarified in the fasting of the people of Nineveh. (Jonah 3:8-10)

3- Fell other's needs

- St. John Chrysostom said once that fasting takes us near God & makes us feel His presence, & also makes us feel the other's needs, because giving & donation or contribution is measured by how much man feels other's needs.

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4- Fasting gives courage, will power & spiritual firmness

- The person who fasts is strong at heart, & spiritually courageous, while the person who is enslaved to the lusts of his body, is weak & is exposed to attack by inferiority.
- St. Isaac says: “There is no weapon stranger than fasting that gives courage in the battle of the evil spirits”.

5- Fasting is an appropriate time for spiritual assembly, retreat & meditation

- According to the book of prophet Joel, the bible says: “Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly” (Joel 2:15)

6- Fasting leads to the life of chastity

- Christian chastity, in its general meaning, is the ability of man to control his senses, inclinations & instincts till he reaches the purity of the heart.
- Training in fasting starts with abstinence from food & different lusts of the senses, then abstinence from the love of possessing, acquisition, greed, malice, love of money & taking what is forbidden.
- The person who is rightly fasting does not complain, grumble or get enraged.
- He does not protest or complain about poverty because fasting has trained him to be satisfied with what he has & thankful in all conditions.

The period of abstinence:

- In all church fasting a person should start daily fasting with a period of abstinence from food & drink, then breaks fasting with food without animal fat.
- This period of abstinence can be agreed upon with the father of confession according to each person's abilities, endurance & the degree of spiritual growth.



Any Questions?