

# FASTING

Fasting is done a little differently in the Eastern and Western Orthodox traditions. We'll start with the Western Orthodox rules for fasting, but you can [click here](#) to jump down to the Eastern Orthodox rules for fasting.

## WESTERN ORTHODOX RULES FOR FASTING:

### Introduction

In any discussion of fasting within the universal Church, one must be aware that until very recent times uniformity of practice has never prevailed in East or West. Perhaps more than any other aspect of church observance – with the possible exception of local calendars of saints – fasting observances have varied considerably from place to place, diocese to diocese, rite to rite, country to country. What has always been maintained, however, is the importance of the principle of fasting at certain times and seasons. Only in Protestantism, modern Roman Catholicism, and even in some modernist Orthodox jurisdictions, have the discipline and wisdom of fasting been abandoned or lost.

The discipline of fasting and abstinence set forth here reflects that of the Western-Rite Orthodox monastic community of Christ the Saviour, as received originally into the Russian Orthodox Church, and later into the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad.

Fasting and abstinence should always be reverently and prayerfully observed and should never become the occasion for any kind of pharisaical judgments or of self-righteous comparisons with those who may be less observant. Indeed, as our Lord has told us, our fasting and abstinence should be observed in such a way that no one will think to compliment it or comment on it. Our observance must be permeated with charity and humility, done out

of love for God and sorrow for our sins, and should never be a source of contention or pride.

## Fasting

Fasting, as distinguished from abstinence, refers to the amount of food eaten and to the time of day at which meals are taken. Its essential principle is that on a fast day, only one full meal may be consumed, and this should be eaten later in the day after 3:00 p.m., (after the canonical hour of None). Unless the fast day is also a day of abstinence, no particular restriction is made in regard to the quantity or nature of the food or drink, moderation always being a reliable guide. For those working who may require more, traditionally a light, meatless collation may be taken at any other time of day (even before 3:00 p.m., if necessary), its quantity amounting to less than half of what would constitute the main meal of the day. Apart from this, no food should be eaten on a fast day.

Water does not break the fast

Fasting is absolutely forbidden on all Sundays, Solemnities and Greater Feasts. Additionally, since both canonical rules and the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict prohibit fasting on Saturdays, only abstinence may be observed on Saturdays in fasting seasons.

Throughout the year, except in Lent when Mondays are also observed, Wednesdays and Fridays are days of fast and abstinence, unless a Solemnity or Greater Feast should occur on one of these days. In the fast-free seasons after Christmas and between Easter and Pentecost, fasting is not observed, but abstinence is still observed on Wednesdays and Fridays. Though there is a school of thought enunciated by Father Alexander Schmemmann which held that even abstinence is dispensed with during the Great Fifty Days. Thus, all Wednesdays and Fridays of the year, unless they are also Solemnities or Greater Feasts, and outside of fast-free times, are also days of fasting.

Because Solemnities and Greater Feasts always begin with First Vespers the evening before the feast, any fast must conclude before the feast begins, i.e., before Vespers. Thus, fasts conclude after the office of None (3:00PM) each day, so that no fasting occurs on a solemn feast day.

### Abstinence

Abstinence, as distinguished from fasting, consists of refraining entirely from eating meat or poultry and gravies, soups or sauces made from meat or poultry. On days of abstinence, fish and dairy products are always permitted. Alcoholic beverages are prohibited, but wine and beer, where customary, are allowed. Abstinence applies to any and all food taken on a particular day.

Unlike fasting, which by its nature ends when one eats, abstinence generally lasts from midnight to midnight. But on Saturdays, or on the eve of Solemnities or Greater Feasts, the abstinence ends with Vespers. Thus on a normal Saturday in Lent, while it is not a day of fast, thus permitting meals earlier in the day, these meals must be meatless at least until the evening meal is taken. Thus evening meals on Lenten Saturdays ought not to be eaten until after Vespers when liturgically the Sunday has already begun. For those who do not attend Vespers, the Sunday observance may be considered as beginning at 5:00 p.m.

### Lent & Advent

The Lenten observance begins on the morning of Ash Wednesday.

In Lent, all days except Saturdays and Sundays (or Solemnities & Greater Feasts) are days of fast on which one main meal may be taken after 3:00 p.m., and, if needed, one other small meatless collation.

Additionally in Lent, apart from Solemnities and Greater Feasts, all Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are days of abstinence, on which no meat or poultry may be eaten.

Only on the Ember Saturday during the first week of Lent, as a special observance, is fasting added to the usual Saturday Lenten abstinence, ending, as usual, after None.

During the Sacred Triduum of Holy Week – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday – the Lenten observance continues as usual; but on Thursday and Friday, no food is taken until after the celebration of the afternoon or evening Liturgy of each day. On Holy Saturday, because no Liturgy will be celebrated until the night service of the Great Vigil, a single meatless meal may be eaten before noontime. The Lenten fast ends with the Great Vigil and Mass of Easter.

The Advent observance begins on the Monday following the First Sunday of Advent, which is always the Sunday occurring nearest to the feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle (November 30). Its observance is identical to that of Lent, except that for the first two weeks of Advent, Mondays are days of fast only, without abstinence. In the third and fourth weeks of Advent, Monday abstinence is added to the observance. The Advent Ember Saturday is observed as in Lent, with fasting and abstinence observed until after None. The Advent observance ends with the beginning of First Vespers on the eve of the Nativity.

## Ember Days & Rogation Days

The Ember Days are of ancient origin and occur four times a year at the changes of the seasons, on the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of the following weeks: the first full week of Lent after the first Sunday of Lent; the week following the octave of Pentecost; after the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14); after the feast of Saint Lucy (December 13). Ember Days are observed with fast and abstinence. Traditionally, almsgiving also should mark these times.

The Rogation Days, which are the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Thursday, are observed with abstinence only, as these occur within the fast-free season of Eastertide. These days are dedicated to prayer for those being ordained to Holy Orders.

## Vigils

Fasting is observed on the Vigils (i.e., the day preceding) of certain major feasts, ending before First Vespers. These vigils are observed for the following: all feasts of Apostles and Evangelists, Christmas (December 24), Saint John Baptist (June 23), Saint Lawrence (August 9), Assumption (August 14), All Saints (October 31). If these Vigils fall on a Sunday, the observance, unless impeded by a Solemnity or Feast, is moved back to Saturday and is observed with abstinence (fasting not being observed on Saturdays apart from Embertides).

Vigils of Apostles which occur during Eastertide are observed with abstinence instead of fasting. Thus no meat may be eaten until after First Vespers on these days.

## Fast-Free Seasons

Fasting is not observed throughout the season from Christmas to Epiphany, or from Easter to the end of the Pentecost Octave. Abstinence, however, is observed as usual on Wednesdays and Fridays during these seasons unless a Solemnity or Greater Feast should occur. (In the Orthodox Western Rite Archdiocese of America, both fast and abstinence may be dispensed with for The Great Fifty Days between Pascha and Pentecost.)

## The Communion Fast

For those receiving Holy Communion, no food or drink is permitted from the preceding midnight until after Mass. In those instances where, for pastoral reason, Mass may be celebrated in the evening, those wishing to receive Holy Communion must fast from noontime at least, if they are unable to fast entirely from the preceding midnight. The only exceptions to this are Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, when all are obliged to fast until after the evening liturgies whether receiving Holy Communion or not.

## Other Fasts

Special fasts may be observed on the occasions of Baptism, Confirmation, Ordinations and similar circumstances as ordered by the Bishop or Abbot. Private fasts observed for personal reasons may be permitted so long as they do not violate the regular fasts as set forth here. In such cases, the person should always act under the guidance and with the blessing of his confessor or spiritual father. Similarly, anyone who may require an exemption from any prescribed fast or abstinence may ask a confessor for such permission. Exemption may be legitimately presumed for those who are physically weak, sick, very old, very young, or in any reasonable necessity. Children should be gradually educated and trained in fasting and can be taught abstinence from an early age.

## EASTERN ORTHODOX RULES FOR FASTING:

On the Calendar will be found notations concerning Fasting days and seasons. Where there is no indication of a fast given, this means that all foods may be eaten (except during Cheesefare Week, when meat is forbidden for every day). where the notation Fast Day is found, this means that a strict fast is observed, in which no meat, eggs, dairy products, fish, wine or oil are to be eaten.

These rules are dependent on the Church's cycle of feasts and fasts, and are contained in the Typikon, mainly in Chapters 32 and 33, repeated in appropriate places of the Menaion and Triodion. In general, except where otherwise noted, all Wednesdays and Fridays (Mondays also, in some monasteries) are kept as days of fasting (an exception being during the Fast Free periods), as well as the four canonical fasting periods (Great Lent, the Apostles' Fast, the Nativity Fast and the Dormition Fast), and certain other days, including the Eve of Theophany (January 5), the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (August 28), and the Elevation of the Cross (September 14). We note here that there are many local variations in the allowances of wine and oil (and sometimes fish), such as on patronal feast days of a parish or monastery, or when the feast of a great Saint (or Saints) is celebrated which has particular local or national significance.

While most Orthodox Christians are perhaps aware of the general rules of fasting for Great Lent, the rules for the other fasting periods are less known. During the Dormition Fast, wine and oil are allowed only on Saturdays and Sundays (and sometimes on a few feast days and vigils). During the Apostles' Fast and the Nativity Fast, the general rules are as follows (from Chapter 33 of the Typikon):

“It should be noted that in the Fast of the Holy Apostles and of the Nativity of Christ, on Tuesday and Thursday we do not eat fish, but only oil or wine.

On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, we eat neither oil nor wine. On Saturday and Sunday we eat fish. If there occur on Tuesday or Thursday a Saint who has a [Great] Doxology, we eat fish; if on Monday, the same; but if on Wednesday or Friday, we allow only oil and wine. If it be a Saint who has a Vigil on Wednesday or Friday, or the Saint whose temple it is, we allow oil and wine and fish. But from the 20th of December until the 25th, even if it be Saturday or Sunday, we do not allow fish.”

Concerning the rules of fasting during the Great Lent, we quote the article, “The Rules of Fasting”, contained in *The Lenten Triodion*, translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos (Ware), Faber & Faber, London, 1978, pp. 35-37:

What “precisely do the rules of fasting demand? Neither in ancient nor in modern times has there ever been exact uniformity, but most Orthodox authorities agree on the following rules:

1. During the week between the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee and that of the Prodigal Son, there is a general dispensation from all fasting. Meat and animal product may be eaten even on Wednesday and Friday.
2. In the following week...the usual fast is kept on Wednesday and Friday. Otherwise there is no special fasting.
3. In the week before Lent, meat is forbidden, but eggs, cheese and other dairy products (as well as fish) may be eaten on all days, including Wednesday and Friday.
4. On weekdays (Monday to Friday inclusive) during the seven weeks of Lent, there are restrictions both on the number of meals taken daily and on the types of food permitted; but when a meal is allowed, there is no fixed limitation on the quantity of food to be eaten.



- On weekdays in the first week, fasting is particularly severe. According to strict observance, in the course of the five initial days of Lent, only two meals are eaten, one on Wednesday and the other on Friday, in both cases after the Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified. On the other three days, those who have the strength are encouraged to keep an absolute fast; those for whom this proves impracticable may eat on Tuesday and Thursday (but not, if possible, on Monday), in the evening after Vespers, when they may take bread and water, or perhaps tea or fruit-juice, but not a cooked meal. It should be added at once that in practice today these rules are commonly relaxed. At the meals on Wednesday and Friday xerophagy is prescribed. Literally this means ‘dry eating’. Strictly interpreted, it signifies that we may eat only vegetables cooked with water and salt, and also such things as fruit, nuts, bread and honey. In practice, octopus and shell-fish are also allowed on days of xerophagy; likewise vegetable margarine and corn or other vegetable oil, not made from olives. But the following categories of food are definitely excluded:
  - (I) meat;
  - (ii) animal products (cheese, milk, butter, eggs, lard, drippings);
  - (iii) fish (i.e., fish with backbones);
  - (iv) oil (i.e., olive oil) and wine (i.e., all alcoholic drinks).
- On weekdays (Monday to Friday inclusive) in the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth weeks, one meal a day is permitted, to be taken in the afternoon following Vespers, and at this one meal xerophagy is to be observed.

- Holy Week. On the first three days there is one meal each day, with xerophagy; but some try to keep a complete fast on these days, or else they eat only uncooked food, as on the opening days of the first week. On Holy Thursday one meal is eaten, with wine and oil (i.e., olive oil). On Great Friday those who have the strength follow the practice of the early Church and keep a total fast. Those unable to do this may eat bread, with a little water, tea or fruit-juice, but not until sunset, or at any rate not until after the veneration of the Epitaphios/Plashchanitsa at Vespers. On Holy Saturday, there is in principle no meal, since according to the ancient practice after the end of the Liturgy of Saint Basil the faithful remained in church for the reading of the Acts of the Apostles, and for their sustenance were given a little bread and dried fruit, with a cup of wine. If, as usually happens now, they return home for a meal, they may use wine but not oil; for on this one Saturday, alone among Saturdays of the year, olive oil is not permitted.

The rule of xerophagy is relaxed on the following days:

1. On Saturdays and Sundays in Lent, with the exception of Holy Saturday, two main meals may be taken in the usual way, around mid-day and in the evening, with wine and olive oil; but meat, animal products and fish are not allowed.
2. On the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25) and Palm Sunday fish is permitted as well as wine and oil, but meat and animal products are not allowed.
3. Wine and oil are permitted on the following days, if they fall on a weekday in the second, third, fourth, fifth or sixth week: [First and Second Finding of the Head of Saint John the Baptist (February 24), Repose of Saint Raphael (February 27), Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste

(March 9), Forefeast of the Annunciation (March 24), Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel (March 26), Repose of Saint Innocent (March 31), Repose of Saint Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow (April 7), Holy Greatmartyr and Victorybearer George (April 23), Holy Apostle and Evangelist Mark (April 25), as well as the Patronal Feast of the church or monastery].

4. Wine and oil are also allowed on Wednesday and Thursday of the fifth week, because of the vigil for the Great Canon. Wine is allowed-and, according to some authorities, oil as well-on Friday in the same week, because of the vigil for the Akathist Hymn.

It has always been held that these rules of fasting should be relaxed in the case of anyone elderly or in poor health. In present-day practice, even for those in good health, the full strictness of the fast is usually mitigated. On weekdays-except, perhaps, during the first week or Holy Week-it is now common to eat two cooked meals daily instead of one. From the second until the sixth week, many Orthodox use wine, and perhaps oil also, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and less commonly on Mondays as well. Permission is often given to eat fish in these weeks. Personal factors need to be taken into account, as for example, the situation of an isolated Orthodox living in the same household as non-Orthodox, or obliged to take meals in a factory, nursing home, or school lunchroom. In cases of uncertainty each should seek the advice of his or her spiritual father.”

The following statement is extremely important to consider when we speak of fasting and fasting rules in the Church. “At all times it is essential to bear in mind that ‘you are not under the law but under grace’ (Romans 6:14), and that ‘the letter kills, but the spirit gives life’ (2 Corinthians 3:6). The rules of fasting, while they need to be taken seriously, are not to be interpreted with dour and pedantic legalism; ‘for the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 14:17).”

