

ON FASTING

Metropolitan Maximos

Fasting, in our days, has become one of the most neglected spiritual values. Because of misunderstandings regarding the nature of fasting, because of confused and reversed priorities in its use, many of today's Orthodox Christians fast very little, or disregard fasting altogether.

The Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church which is scheduled to be convened in the near future has placed the problem of fasting as one of the first items on its agenda. It is hoped that through this Council the age-old practice of the Church to use fasting as one of the important means of spiritual growth will regain its proper place in the life of the Church.

Fasting was practiced by the Lord Himself. After prayer and fasting for forty days in the wilderness, the Lord victoriously faced the temptations of the devil (Matthew 4:1-11). The Lord himself asked the disciples to use fasting as an important spiritual weapon to achieve spiritual victories (Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29; Luke 2:37). The example of the Lord was followed by His disciples (Acts 14:23; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 7:5; 2 Corinthians 6:5, 11:27, etc.). What is fasting? Why is it so important? Why does fasting precede such important feasts such as Easter and Christmas?

The importance of fasting depends on its meaning. Many of the Fathers have written on fasting. Among others, St. Basil has left us with most inspired comments on fasting. St. Basil tells us that fasting is not abstaining from food only; it is first of all, abstaining from sin. Grounded in the teaching of the Fathers, the Church in its hymnology describes fasting as the mother of chastity and prudence, as the accuser of sin and as the advocate of repentance, the life worthy of angels and the salvation of humans (The Lenten Triodion, trans. Kallistos Ware, London 1978, p. 195). Fasting becomes all of these when observed in the proper spirit.

First of all, fasting is abstinence from food. By detaching us from earthly goods and realities, fasting has a liberating effect on us and makes us worthy of the life of the spirit, a life similar to that of angels. Second, fasting, as abstinence from bad habits and sin, is the mother of Christian virtues, the mother of sound and wholesome thinking; it allows us to establish the proper priority between the material and spiritual, giving priority to the spiritual.

Fasting is the advocate of repentance. Adam and Eve disobeyed God; they refused to fast from the forbidden fruit. They became slaves of their own desires. But now through fasting, through obedience to the rules of the Church regarding the use of spiritual and material goods, we may return to the life in Paradise, a life of communion with God. Thus, fasting is a means of salvation, this salvation being a life we live in accordance with the Divine will, in communion with God.

Because of the liberating effect of fasting, both material and spiritual, the Church has connected fasting with the celebration of the major feasts of our tradition. Easter is, of course, our main feast. It is the "feast of feasts." It is the feast of our liberation from the bondage of sin, from corrupted nature, from death. For on that day, through His Resurrection from the dead, Christ has raised us "from death to life, and from earth to heaven" (Resurrection Canon), Christ, "our new Passover," has taken us away from the land of slavery, sin and death, to the promised land of freedom, bliss and glory; from our sinful condition to resurrected life.

It is most appropriate to prepare for this celebration through a liberating fast, both material and spiritual. This is the profound meaning that fasting takes during the Great Lent. Let us allow ourselves to take advantage of the spiritual riches of the Church. Let us use the precious messianic gifts offered to us through its sacramental life, through its celebrations of the central mysteries of our salvation in Christ. Let us use the spiritual weapons,

"to fight the good fight, to walk the way of fasting, to crush the heads of the invisible dragons, to prove ourselves victorious over sin, and without condemnation to reach our goal of worshiping the Holy Resurrection" (Prayer of the Presanctified Liturgy).

This is the challenge of the Great Lent: to use fasting to obtain the resurrected life, to unite with the Risen Lord. Who could refuse to accept this challenge?

FASTING FROM INIQUITIES AND FOODS

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"Let us fast an acceptable and very pleasing fast to the Lord. True fast is the estrangement from evil, temperance of tongue, abstinence from anger, separation from desires, slander, falsehood perjury. Privation of these is true fasting." A Hymn of First Monday of Lent By St. Basil the Great

"I AM THE LORD THAT HEALETH THEE"

Man is created as a unique synthesis of material and spiritual elements, which are mysteriously combined in him, as recorded in the Scriptures for, "the body without the spirit is dead" (James 2:26). The Old Testament records the ancient belief that God, after creating the universe, used a different and distinct method to create the human being. Genesis records that:

"... the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7).

Therefore, religion emphasizes that man needs guidance for his spirit as well as instruction for a virtuous and healthy body. A harmonious co-working of spirit and body was intended in man's creation. It is a firm belief strengthened by scientific finding that the alliance of these two elements within man was the expectation of God in man's pursuit of God's likeness (cf. Gen. 1:26).

The imperfection of man, which is attributed to his fall, diminishes his faculties, but did not destroy his capacities, nor the need for growth of his spirit and body and especially the harmony between the two. This is why the Christian religion is concerned not only with the spiritual rightness of man, but also with his bodily needs, even on a secondary level.

The balance of forces which move man, both from within and without, should be regulated for a harmonious life. Such forces as faith and doubt, humbleness and arrogance, obedience and disobedience of ideals, abundance and poverty, love and hate, righteousness and iniquity, virtue and vice, loving chastity and lustful carnal desires, and many others exist in the nature of every human. His being is the platform on which these forces shape his character and nature.

Because fallen man feels guilt within himself, and his divine endowments are bluffed, Almighty God provides man with the means of healing - a healing of the

body and of the spirit by the wondrous correlation between the two. Sincere faith expressed in prayers to God heals afflictions of body and spirit. The Scriptures record many activities of this healing of body and spirit. Jesus Christ, facing the tempting bait of materialistic nourishment in the wilderness, declared, "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3). In order to cure iniquities and afflictions of the body and the spirit, the Scriptures record the healing words and deeds of God especially pertaining to the healing of the nature and character as explained and practiced by Christ Himself. To pray, believe, worship, give alms and fast are means of healing and restoration for body and its spirit. These and other means are related, one to another, for a complete cure of the whole man.

The Lord says, "I am the Lord that healeth thee" (Exodus 15:26), "I wound and I healeth" (Deut. 32:39) and "to heal the broken heart" (Luke 5:16). Helping to heal the afflictions of the body and spirit is the practice of fasting, not only from foods, which affects the body, but, more important, fasting from sins and iniquities, because "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

ORIGIN OF PRACTICE OF FASTING

One of the longest established discipline of the human body is that of fasting. Among pagan religions, Judaism and Christianity fasting is considered an important element in religious practices. Fasting (equivalent to the Greek word *nesteia* and Latin words *jejunium, abstinentia*) literally means a total abstention from food for a certain period of time. It also means abstention from such pleasures as celebrations of birthdays and marriages and, as developed later in the Christian era, even church festivals. The origin of fasting as a moral discipline is obscured. There is no clue to the original purposes of fasting. The meaning of fasting among the Jewish people developed around the selection of certain foods and the duration of abstention from them. Fasting appears early as an act of devotion among the Jewish people, but without the formalized rules developed later. Even in the early Christian Church fasting was practiced among many, but not according to rules. Fasting generally was considered "a work of reverence toward God."

The New Testament does not record the special dates and days of fasting nor specific methods of fasting. It is true that among the Jewish people there were certain days observed by the people, but it seems they were free to chose the duration of the fast as well as the selection of foods. However, there were

extraordinary days in which fasting was kept by all, such as during famine, catastrophe, etc. The Jewish people could fast on Monday and Thursday, but it was not compulsory. However, the zealots kept these fastings strictly. The first Christians instituted feasts and fastings after Jewish patterns, but the interpretation of their fastings was different.

The origin of fasting in the Christian Church is to be found in many sources. The first Christians inherited the practice of fasting from the Jews. Fasting also has pagan origins. The Church usually tried to replace pagan fastings and feasts by giving Christian meaning to those observances through worship in the True God, moral uprightness, fasting, prayer and repentance. Fasting was developed as a meritorious work before God. Fasting became an obligatory practice among monks and nuns, who kept strict fastings in the assumption that their fastings would support their concept of virginity. Fasting was included in the vows of the first Christian monks.

CHRIST'S MODE OF FASTING

The fact that fasting was not determined in specific days and certain foods originally, indicates that fasting in itself, for the sake of fasting, was not considered as such. In the New Testament fasting is mentioned by Christ Himself, the first time in reference to temptations: "when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterwards ahungered" (Matthew 4:2); the second time when Christ admonished the disciples on fasting versus hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They, have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matthew 6:16-18; cf. Isaiah 58:5).

The Lord does not refer to specific days, foods or complete abstention from foods. Christ does not refer to them as not having been fixed either, nor does He mention days and foods, because they were known to the people of that time. Here Christ refers to fasting as a sincere attitude of deep humility and repentance, with discipline and vigorous uprightness, all to be held in secrecy, as quoted above (cf. Mtt. 6:18). This principle of secrecy is to be applied not only to fasting, but also to prayer and to alms giving (cf. Matt. 6:4,6).

At the time of Christ, fasting among the Jewish people was more or less a legalistic observance, although not compulsory. Jesus Christ referred to Jewish fasting in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (cf. Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee kept the days of fasting, gave alms regularly, prayed frequently, and consequently expected rewards; yet he received not only disapproval, but was reprimanded for hypocrisy compared to the publican who humbly asked forgiveness. The intention of him who obeys the Lord's commandments is appropriate communion with God. The attitude of the Pharisee was an external pseudo-piety intended for his own satisfaction and to earn praise. The Pharisee appeared with a "sad countenance, for they disfigured their faces that they may appear unto men to fast" (Matt. 6:16). Hypocrisy destroys even the cardinal virtues. Humbleness and secrecy should be for practicing God's commandments. The Psalmist cries "I humble my soul with fasting" (Psalm 35:13). Jesus Christ condemns any virtue which is observed with hypocrisy, for it leaves no room for humility and repentance.

The Christian Church adopted the custom of fasting from the Jewish religion, but with a new meaning and purpose, and a new dimension contributing to a specific end. The Christian practice of fasting is not for the sake of fasting alone. Fasting in itself is not a virtue. It is especially for certain days and seasons, mainly as a preparation for a feast. Also fasting is practiced for self-control of the spirit and the flesh; for giving alms to the needy; for praying more frequently, enabling these virtues to be practiced according to principles set forth by Christ (cf. Matt. chs. 5, 6, 7).

Fasting, compared to other Christian activities, is a means, not an end in itself. Nevertheless, it is the only practice which has to do with the nutrition of the body, having a direct effect upon its physical nature, which in turn affects spiritual well-being as well. This is why the Church at the beginning of the Christian era adopted the practice of fasting, establishing procedures of duration and specific types and quantities of food. During these specific days of fasting the faithful either abstained from foods entirely or would take only a certain amount of bread and water (*xerophagia*). New Testament references state attitudes and principles of fasting, but not details pertaining to specific days and foods.

DEVELOPMENT OF FASTING OF DAYS AND FOODS

The development of certain days of fasting and the selection of certain foods was a long process gradually related to the feast days of the Church. It was natural

for the first Christians, with a background of Jewish traditions, to apply certain days of fasting to their own religious life. They inherited the weekly two days of fasting from Jewish tradition practiced by the first Christians themselves. But the Christians gave new meaning to fasting in general as well as to the two fast days of the week. Instead of Monday and Thursday, the Christians changed the fast days to Wednesday and Friday, Wednesday because on this day the Jews conspired against Christ, and Friday because it was the day of His Crucifixion. These two days of fasting are first mentioned in the Didache of the Apostles, an early Christian manual on morals and Christian practices. It is not known if these two days were compulsory or voluntary. Tertulian, a prolific Christian writer of the 3rd century, comments on these two days, "inasmuch as one has the time and the reason of his own free will and not as a commandment" (De Jejunio 2) one ought to fast.

Origen, the first great theologian in Alexandria, wrote, "we have the fourth and the sixth day of the week in which, according to the sacred institutes, we fast" (On Leviticus, Homily 10, Migne 12,528). Justin the Martyr in his Apology (150 A.D.) mentions these two days of fasting. Eusebius (c.265c.340), the great historian of the Christian Church, referring to Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon (c.130-c.200), wrote that the duration and manners of fasting were not fixed:

"... for some think that they ought to fast only one day, some two days, some more days, some compute their day as consisting of 40 hours night and day; and this diversity existed among those that observe, for it is not a matter that has just sprung up in our times, but long ago among those before me".

Peter the Martyr (d.311) in his Sermon on Penitence mentions the two fixed fast days of the week. From his writings the Sixth Ecumenical Synod adopted as a canon of the church that:

"Wednesday is to be fasted, because then the Jews conspired to betray Jesus; Friday, because he then suffered for us. We keep the Lord's Day as a day of joy, because then our Lord arose" (Ancient Epitome of Canon 15 of Peter the Martyr; cf. Canon 69 of the Apostles).

Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin, says:

"... we abolish fasting during Novation Week on account of the great joy attending the Resurrection of the Son and Logos (and for the same reason in the week after Pentecost)".

Canon 50 of Laodicea commands that dry bread be eaten throughout Lent. Bishop Epiphanius says in *Heretics* 65 that during the fast of Lent dry bread and the practice of countenance are incumbent; Canon 69 of the Apostles recommends on Wednesday and Friday and in Lent the eating of bread once a day without olive oil and without drinking wine (see Interpretation of Canon 64 of the Apostles) in Pedalion. Theodore Balsamon, a 12th century commentator on the canons of the church, says, "even the eating of shell fish on Wednesday and Friday and during Lent is prohibited" The Constitutions of the Apostles (preceding the Apostolic Canons) reads, "It is obligatory to fast during Great Week and on Wednesday and Friday".

Moreover, on Saturday and Sunday during Great Lent, except Saturday of Holy Week, no fasting is permitted (cf. Canon 55 of the Sixth Ecumenical Synod; Canon 18 of the Synod of Gangra (c.340); Canon 66 of the Apostles). Saturdays and Sundays, except during Lent as mentioned, are not fast days:

"If any of the clergy be found fasting on the Lord's Day, or on the Sabbath, excepting the one only, let him be deposed. If a layman, let him be excommunicated" (Canon 66 of the Apostles; cf. Canon 18 of Synod of Gangra).

Zonaras, the profound 12th century commentator on canons, wrote that fasting on Sundays is not permitted "for Christ rose from the grave ... we should spend it in offering joyous thanks to God". Zonaras also says, "Fasting carries with it the idea of grief and sorrow".

DESIGNATED DAYS FOR FASTING

The period of time before the celebration of Holy Week of the Christian Church was designated as a time of fasting in imitation of the fasting of the Lord Jesus Christ before He began His official mission. This period of time has been designated for the Christian as one of utmost dedication to the principles of Christian life and for repentance, forgiveness and absolution of sins. This period is known as the Great Lent (*Tessarakoste*, *Quadragesimal*, forty days). It is the time when the pious Christian humbly prepares himself for the commemoration of Christ's Resurrection with more zeal in prayers, alms-giving and fastings from sins and foods. During the Great Lent special services and prayers are observed by the individual Christian and the corporate Church.

For the commemoration of the fasting of Jesus Christ, the Christian is directed to abstain from certain foods. Canon 69 of the Apostles determined this period of fasting officially:

"If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or reader, or singer, does not fast the holy Quadragesimal (Lent) fast of Easter, or the fourth day (Wed.), or the day of Preparation (Fri.), let him be deposed, unless he be hindered by some bodily infirmity. If he be a layman, let him be excommunicated."

The Synod of Laodicea (343 or 381), set forth the following canons: "During lent the bread shall not be offered except on Saturday and Sunday" (Canon 49); "the fast shall not be relaxed on the, Thursday of the last week of Lent, thus dishonoring the whole season; but the fast shall be kept throughout the whole, period" (Canon 50); "during the fast no feasts of the martyrs shall be celebrated" (Canon 51); "no wedding or birthday feasts shall be celebrated during Lent" (Canon 52).

Balsamon, wrote that "obligatory fasting, beside that of the Great Lent, is seven days before the celebration of the Transfiguration of Christ and seven days before the Repose of the Theotokos, which later was known as the 15 days before the celebration of the Repose of the Theotokos". Balsamon also refers to seven days of fasting before the day of the Holy Apostles (June 29), and seven days before the Birth of Christ.

Fasting has remained an act of dedication to the Will of God which reflects piety in prayers and alms-giving and especially in self-control and self-determination according to the Scriptures. There has been an evolution through the centuries concerning the methods of fasting - the duration of time and the selection of foods, from light fasting observances to very strict ones and back again to the lighter observance. Fasting is a means, according to circumstances and objectives, for achieving the virtues of uprightness by sincere Christians. The duration of time and the choice of foods was applied differently in the early Church compared to later centuries. Fasting at the beginning of the Christian era differs from what Balsamon mentions above and from that officially designated by the Church today, and is much different from the practice of the Orthodox Christian today. However, the strict observances of fasting, has prevailed in the monasteries and convents where original ideals of virginity and chastity are perpetuated. The official program of the Orthodox Church today for the duration of time and the selection of foods for fasting is as follows:

- The Great Lent begins Monday after Sunday of Cheese, the fifth week before Holy Week, and lasts through Saturday of Lazarus, and continues through Holy Week. Abstention from meat, fish and dairy products is observed, except on Palm Sunday and the Annunciation, March 25, when fish may be eaten. On Saturday and Sunday of Lent, wine, oil and shellfish may be eaten. This selection of foods is applied to the other fast periods, below, except when indicated otherwise.
- Fasting before Christmas is for 40 days, from November 15 through December 24, during which period fish may be eaten.
- Fasting of the Holy Apostles starts on Monday after the Sunday of All Saints Day and ends on June 29th, the celebration of Apostles Peter and Paul.
- August 1 to 15 is for the Repose (Dormition) of Theotokos. Wednesday and Friday of each week.
- The day before the Epiphany, January 5.
- The day of the Beheading of John the Forerunner, August 29.
- The day of the Exaltation of the Cross, September 14.

FASTING WITH COMMUNION, PRAYER, CHRISTIAN LIFE

Fasting from foods and, more important, from sins is observed in partaking of the very preparation for Holy Communion, the Body and very Blood of Jesus Christ, especially during Great Lent. For the pious Christian, Holy Communion is the sacred privilege of being in communion with God Himself. It is a sacred union of his own being with that of His Creator and Redeemer. Thus the pious Christian tries to practice the commandments of God the year around. His repentance, confession, prayers, fastings and alms-giving especially before partaking of Holy Communion are spiritual acts, which bring him nearer to God.

The saints and pious servants of God practiced fasting, among other things, as a means for furthering their own spiritual growth in the service of the Church. In the New Testament fasting is linked with prayer. Jesus Christ, in reference to the banishment of the evil spirit, assured His disciples that even the devil is rebuked by prayer and fasting: "This kind (of the devil) can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29; cf. Matt. 17:20-21).

EFFECTS OF FASTING IN LIFE

True fasting is the entire abstention from foods. The Christian meaning of abstention from foods has developed various interpretations. They have varied

from time to time in duration, method of practice, kinds of food, consumed and implications of their affect on the life of the Christian. Regardless of the non-religious aspects of fasting (that is, one's appearance and health, fanaticism, self-satisfaction, modes of diets, and vegetarianism), fasting has the same effect on the body. Abstention from foods has its effects on the body regardless of human presuppositions and ideals. Nevertheless, the fasting of the Christian is based on a religious point of view. It is an expression of one's reverence for Almighty God, a kind of humble obedience to the old commandments and especially the new ones that express the "newness of life". It is a basic practice in the brotherly Christian community in which the life of dedication to the divine cause is inseparable from human sacrifice for one's fellow man, his neighbor and he who is "the least".

It is important to note that fasting as an observance and dedication to the Will of God presupposes a healthy body strong enough to endure the bodily effects of fasting. For those who are ill or weak in body fasting may be regulated in terms of duration and selection of certain foods in order to retain their health and fulfill their obligations at work and at home. St. Timothy (381 A.D.) gave a canonical answer on fasting for those who are sick or weak in body, an answer which was adopted as a canon by the Sixth Ecumenical Synod in Trullo. It reads:

"Fasting was devised in order to humble the body. If, therefore, the body is already in a state of humbleness and illness or weakness, the person ought to partake of as much as he or she may wish and be able to get along with food and drink" (Canon 8 of St. Timothy; cf. Canon 69 of the Apostles; cf. Canon 10 of St. Timothy).

St. Timothy's answer can be used by the pious Christian to regulate his fastings with sincerity and without concession. A person who is ill or weak in body should however strive all the harder to abstain from sins. For the sick or the weak in body, in accordance with the definition of fasting by St. Timothy, it is proper that a minimum of fasting be observed when they are not strong enough to endure the strict fasting from foods observed mostly by monks and nuns.

The official regulation of fasting depends upon the synods of the Orthodox Church. The pace of life and circumstances of today require a change in the fasting observances of the Church. The suggested minimum fasting in duration and in foods which might be abstained by those who are weak in body is:

1. the first week of Lent and that of Holy Week;
2. one week before Christmas;

3. two days before Holy Apostles Day (June 29);
4. one day before the Transfiguration of Christ (August 6);
5. two days before the Repose of Theotokos (August 15);
6. Friday around the year;
7. one day before the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14).

During all fast periods those of sound health abstain from meat, fish and all dairy products is observed, except when fish is permitted. The use of vegetable oils is permitted during fast periods, although olive oil may be consumed only on Saturdays and Sundays of Lent. Imitation foods such as margarine and vegetable products of all kinds may be classified as fast foods. Some sea foods (shrimp, oyster, lobster, crab meat, octopus) invertebrate shellfish are considered permissible fast foods.)

Children should be instructed as to the purpose and meaning of church observances such as the procedures of fasting. Children should be taught the ideals of abstention from foods and from iniquities and their relationship to prayer, alms-giving, self-control and love. Children of sound health should fast. The main purpose of children fasting is to make them aware that fasting is a dedication and pledge to obey the principles of faith in Christ. Infants are not required to fast. However, the feeding of infants should take place at least two or three hours before Holy Communion.

It is obvious that much emphasis is placed on the selection of foods and the duration for fasting. In the concern for the selection of the proper fast foods, the main purpose of fasting many times is overshadowed. Abstention from certain foods has abstention in fasting, but only as a means to the spiritual uprightness that comes from humbling one's body in obedience to the Will of God.

The primary purpose for fasting from foods and iniquities is that of continence and chastity (moderation among those married). More important fasting means abnormal and perverted carnal pleasures are to be eliminated entirely as a deadly sin. Apostle Paul admonishes the Romans on this subject, saying,

"God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie ... For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly ... Who knowing the judgment of God, that they

which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them” (Romans 1:24-27,32). These are practices which dishonour our society today.

The Christian is called upon to apply more and more his principles the year around, and especially during the appointed days. Unlike those who fast or starve without religious presuppositions, fasting for the sake of fasting or starving from lack of food, the Christian invokes the Grace of God, and feels the presence of divine communion. He is fasting, from practices and thoughts which are beyond the abstention from material nutrition.

Fasting from foods is a step on the ladder of life. Each step makes the next step easier. Thus the technique of fasting is flexible depending on individual circumstances. It is especially important in fasting that the Christian abstain from harming his neighbor, envying his fellow man and from being prejudiced. While avoiding negative thoughts and practices he also should cultivate thoughts and practices consistent with the new commandment of love and charity.

STANDARDS SET FORTH BY FATHERS OF CHURCH

The Fathers of the Church, preaching on fasting, set forth two distinguished standards:

1. they interpreted the Holy Scriptures on fasting as a means for spiritual achievements;
2. witnessing their profound knowledge was their own experience of fasting under many and varied circumstances related to environment.

This is the difference, a sound and profound difference, between the Fathers of the past and the preachers of today. If this is true of most of the key teachings of Christ, it is also true of the practice and purpose of fasting. For this reason, a few passages of the Fathers were selected to bring forth the true meaning of fasting.

Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215), a great theologian, wrote in his Selection from the Prophets:

“Fasting is abstention from foods according to the meaning of the word, but the food does not make us either more just or more unjust. Yet, in its mystical meaning it declares that as the life of each one depends upon food, total abstention is the sign of death. Thus we ought to abstain from worldly things, for we would die as far as worldly matters are concerned, and after that, when we partake of food of divine nature, we will live in God.

Above all, total abstention empties the soul of matter, and presents the soul pure and nimble to the body according to the divine words. Then, on the one hand, worldly nourishment consists of temporal life and iniquities, while divine nourishment is faith, hope, love, patience, knowledge, peace, prudence as our Lord said in Matthew: 'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled' (5:6), where truly He attributes this longing to the soul and not to the body."

Isidore, a great teacher of the church, 360, in Epistle 403 says:

"Fasting in respect of food is of no benefit for those who fail to fast with all their senses; for whosoever is successfully waging his battle must be temperate in all things".

St. John Chrysostom (345-407) said that the purpose of fasting is to prepare for partaking of the Holy Eucharist and for the Christian solemn celebrations. Chrysostom taught many times that fasting is not merely the abstention from certain foods, but mainly an abstention from evil doings.

Chrysostom also warns against hypocritical fasting:

"It is possible for one who fasts not to be rewarded for his fasting. How? when indeed we abstain from foods, but do not abstain from iniquities - when we do not eat meat, but gnaw to pieces the homes of the poor - when we do not become drunkards with wine, but we become drunkards with evil pleasures; when we abstain all the day, but all the night we spend in unchastened shows. Then what is the benefit of abstention from foods, when on the one hand you deprive your body of a selected food, but on the other offer yourself unlawful food?"