

GREAT LENT

By Fr. George Shalhoub

We read in the book of Ecclesiastes that there is a time and a season for everything under the sun. The Church gives us time for reflection in the form of “Fasts,” which always come before and enable us to prepare for a special *Feast*. The Church offers the Christmas fast, the Dormition fast, but especially the season of Great Lent. The Church sets aside this time for a “*personal retreat*” —*for a physical change, for an attitude change, and above all, for a spiritual change*. This is the time to *reform* our lives, to *transform* our lives and to *form* our lives to be as God intended them from the beginning of time, to be in His image and likeness.

A *physical change* occurs when we honor our bodies, remembering that St. Paul tells us, “you are the temple of the Holy Spirit.” An *attitude change* occurs when we honor our intellect and look for guidance through the scriptures and spiritual writings of the Church. A *spiritual change* comes from above through prayer as we draw closer to God in the silence of our hearts, so that at the end of our fasting period we must be a better people.

Physical Change

Fasting means a change in our normal eating habits and includes a change in what we do with our bodies. It requires taking things out of our lives and bringing something new into them. It is the re-discovery of the Christian life as hunger for God and as a fight, a battle against evil desires. “I have fought the good fight,” says St. Paul. What we do with our bodies affects our minds, our hearts and our spirits. The physical change of Lent gives each of us the clarity to ask, “Who am I?” “Who do I belong to?” and “What is the true desire of my heart?”

Attitude Change

So, the fast during Great Lent is a min-retreat that is meant to result in a *personal conversion, a change of mind*, which should change our ways and allow us to walk as disciples with Christ. The best way to take account of our attitude is for each to ask, “Where am I?” and “Where do I stand?” Someone once said, “Give me a place to stand and I will change the world.” Fasting helps us take account of our attitudes. It helps us to put away cynicism, hopelessness, and disbelief. Fasting helps change our outlook. It gives back to us the perspective of Heaven, the perspective of faith. It gives us, as St. Paul says, “the mind [attitude] of Christ.”

Spiritual Change

Finally, fasting asks of us, “What am I doing?” and “Am I faithful to God...”

1. By attending Church and receiving the Sacrament?
2. By attempting to grow in prayer and holiness?
3. By letting go of the grudges and anger, I have held on to?
4. By abstaining from envying others?
5. By putting away jealousy and pettiness?

6. By forgiving and loving as God forgives and loves us?
7. By re-establishing God and His Kingdom as my *first* priority?

Fasting is a time to be renewed and to be free, that is, to be reconciled not only with God but with the people around us. The Scriptures remind us that if we are on our way to Church to offer our bread at the altar and we remember that our brother has something against us, or we have something against our brother, we are to leave our offering (or our rule of fasting) at the altar, and first be reconciled with our father or mother or friend. And only then can we be reconciled with God. Great Lent is a period that helps us to forgive others. Jesus told us, "You must forgive as I have forgiven you."

According to the Gospel, we can assume that Jesus believed that His followers would use fasting as a means for gaining spiritual growth and power. But what does He teach about our approach to fasting? "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matt. 6:16-18)

To help us in our journey, the Church offers us special times of prayer during the week. On Mondays, Compline, on Wednesdays the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, and the Salutations to the Mother of God (Akathist) on Fridays .

To paraphrase one of our saints of the sixth century - St. John of the Ladder: "Fasting is to do away with anything that delights our tastes. Fasting ends lust, takes away bad thoughts, frees us from evil dreams. Fasting makes for purity of prayer, enlightens the soul, gives us a watchful mind and deliverance from spiritual blindness. Fasting is the door of remorse for our sins, humility of attitude, joy in our weakness and dependence upon God, alertness in sleep, health of the body, remission of sins and the delight of heaven."

So, this is the Fast of Great Lent:

- ◆ Give up: meat, "junk food," hatred, anger, and gossip.
- ◆ Take up: simple meatless dishes, humility, repentance, acts of kindness to the needy, and forgiving others.

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