

THE NATIVITY FAST /ADVENT FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

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The Nativity Fast - a period of preparation for the celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ - begins November 15/28 and continues until January 6/19.

Fasting is an integral part of the Orthodox Church. In addition to the Nativity Fast, major fasts include the fast of Great Lent, the Apostles Fast and the Dormition Fast. Generally speaking, Wednesday and Fridays throughout the year are days of fasting plus certain specific holidays such as the Exaltation of the Life-Giving Cross (9/14) and the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (8/29).

FASTING IN THE SCRIPTURES

Fasting is a purposeful practice of the Church that is well established historically. Moses fasted forty days and forty nights at the time of the writing of the Ten Commandments when he was on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28). The Holy Prophet Elijah fasted for forty days and forty nights when he was on Mount Horeb and the word of the Lord came to him (Kings 1: 8).

Jesus Christ fasted in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. When Jesus was tempted by the devil He said: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:2-4).

FASTING IS A COLLECTIVE EFFORT

When Orthodox Christians participate in the life of the Church during this period of fasting, a collective effort is experienced to focus on the importance of Christ's Nativity. Jesus Christ came into the world as the Son of God to redeem and save the world. Each year we celebrate as a present day reality, God's coming into the world. With enthusiasm, we sing "God is with us"! Fasting is a way we individually and collectively focus on the importance of God in our lives and we redirect our efforts along the path of life we began at Holy Baptism. The whole world measures time according to the birth of Jesus Christ. We need to measure our efforts in celebration of His Nativity.

TO FAST IS TO REFOCUS

Fasting is more than abstaining from meat and dairy products. It is a disciplining and refocusing of the

self. For parents, participating in the fasts of the Church is a way to direct the whole family in the way of the Church.

Raising children is a major responsibility. Children are a blessing which are prayed for at the Sacrament of Matrimony. Parents are charged with providing for the material and spiritual needs of their children. A safe and secure home is needed for each child. Love and warmth, direction and discipline are essential ingredients for child growth. The home is the first school, the first community, and the first church of each child. Children develop their framework of life as they learn at home. Parents who stress the importance of the religious life at home and in their lives set an example for their children to follow.

Advent is a time to direct attention to Christ's birth and to direct our lives to make room for Christ in our hearts. Advent is a time to clean our physical and spiritual homes for residency by the Wonderful Counselor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace. (Is.9: 6)

Children go through various cycles of growth. Parents also grow in their roles of being husbands and wives, mothers and fathers. Changes are needed throughout the life of the family to ensure that spiritual growth continues. The constant linking of the family to the life of the parish church is of major importance throughout the growth process.

Children need to be brought to church as infants to be Baptized and Christened. They need to attend church and church school throughout their young lives. Holy Confession and Communion need to be practiced by all members of the family. Church attendance and church school attendance must be a priority. In the Book of Proverbs we are told: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov.22: 6).

THE CHALLENGES OF THE NATIVITY FAST

As families go through Advent, there will be many distractions and challenges to draw us away from the life of the Church. These must be faced with resolve and conviction. Secular activities, peer pressure, gluttony, inertia, sports, bad weather,

personal goals and interests, illness...these and more can sap the energy we have and pull us away from the Church. It is important to keep our goal clear. At Holy Baptism we renounced Satan and expressed our belief in Jesus Christ as King and as God. We embarked on the road of the Kingdom of God. We need to avoid fatal detours along the way.

Children need to see their parents **at church with regularity**. They need to be in church when the weather is cold and the roads are bad. Church attendance needs to be a top priority. We don't fail to go to work and we don't fail to send our children to school in the wintertime. There is no reason to keep them from church. Monday through Saturday provide more than ample opportunities for sports and other secular activities. When church and other activities conflict, church should take priority in order to strengthen the family life.

THE HOME AS THE "LITTLE CHURCH"

During Advent, we should **increase our reading of Holy Scripture**. We should increase our church attendance. An effort should be made to help out the less fortunate and needy. **Almsgiving** should be coupled with our fasting. Our prayer life will need to be revitalized and the time spent in prayer requires an increase. Until we are praying every moment of our lives, we will not have reached the point when we pray enough.

Our homes are small churches. Life at home can reflect the church of which we are a part. Our daily activities can be held to the standards of the Christian Church. Our books and entertainment can be of high moral standards. Our bodies are to be treated as the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 26). At home, we can join in the prayer life of the Church. We can read the **daily Scripture readings** of the Church. We can say the **prayers that are appropriate throughout the day** and for the tasks we face in life. The **lives of the saints** can become part of our lives through prayer, reading and iconography.

PARENTS LIVING OUT THE FAITH

Living the religious life as parents sets an example for children, will enrich a marriage and will strengthen children for life, as they grow older. Being active in the church nourishes the person and helps the person to grow in Christ. Family traumas, personal setbacks, illnesses and disappointments in life, all can

be more readily handled if the family is inextricably linked with the life of the Church. The support and care of the Christian community is readily available in time of need. Necessary direction and help comes through the Church when we are in distress.

OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE

As our children grow older, we do not know the world they will face. We do know that God created this world and that when our lives are grounded in God and His Church, we can face the world with confidence. We can be certain that if our children are raised in the Church, they are being fully prepared for the adulthood they will encounter.

If our children develop a strong spiritual orientation, if we give them the opportunity for solid Christian education, if they know that the Church is the priority of our lives, they will incorporate this into their lives as they grow older and develop. The examples we set as parents will carry over to our children.

There is another element of life we need to consider. The children in juvenile correctional facilities and the adults in jails and prisons seldom come from homes which have parents who took them to church with regularity and had them in church school each week. Certainly there are exceptions to this assertion, but by and large, there is a great deal of crime control and prevention practiced when families live according to the ways of the Church.

THE TASK OF THE ORTHODOX PARENT

Being a parent in contemporary times is difficult. Parents worry about their children's education. They worry about their jobs. They worry about crime and personal safety. Long term economic security is a concern. The costs of higher education and job training face the struggling family. Raising children to have good moral standards and personal discipline is a challenge. Keeping families together in the face of all the stresses and strains of modern life is an on-going issue.

Parents must balance their daily responsibilities of raising children with other responsibilities they may have. Other responsibilities may include working outside the home, caring for or providing support for other family members in need, attending to personal goals in life and engaging in activities which are

recreational and relaxing. Home maintenance and home making are time consuming.

As Orthodox Christians, we need to ensure that our lives are built with God at the center to give us direction and to hold us together. Fasting and prayer will fortify us for the long road of life. Church attendance and participation in the Holy Sacraments of Confession and Communion will enable us to renew the relationship we established with God at Holy Baptism.

We are blessed to be members of the Orthodox Church where we can worship in freedom and peace with regularity. Through the year, we can come to church and learn. We can come to find solace and comfort. We can charge our spiritual batteries and light up our lives. As the Feast of the Nativity draws near, let us ensure that this year, we will make an extra effort to be in church more, to pray more, to read the Holy Scriptures more and to fast more. When the time comes for us to greet each other with the words "Christ is Born, Glorify Him" let us have taken the full opportunity to prepare for Jesus Christ to live permanently in our hearts.
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