

# Getting the Most Out of Lent

by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.

Over the years, my family (husband Jim, daughters Michelle [age 18] and Maria [age 15]) has come to understand that Lent is a radical change for us, i.e. being in Church several days a week and at least no meat for 40+ days. We will attend most, if not all, Presanctified Liturgies, Friday Akathist, Saturday Vespers, Sunday Liturgy, Sunday Mission Vespers. Plus we'll attend at least one Saturday of the Souls, now that I've learned to prepare *koliva* (boiled wheat) in memory of my father, inlaws, grandparents, etc. When an 18-year-old tells you that her friends ask her where she can eat during Lent, you realize that she's heard the message!

Our "Rule" has varied over the years depending on the ages of the girls and if there were any health concerns for anyone. Some years the fast was stricter (less or no dairy) during the first and third weeks and Holy Week; other years, Monday, Wednesday and Fridays throughout Lent, plus Holy Week. Each year we work on intensifying our efforts.

I remember my seminary classmate, Fr. Krist Nickolas, telling me that as a child his *yiayia* (grandmother) would not permit him to drink milk on Wednesdays and Fridays during the year as a reminder of Jesus' sacrifice: on Wednesday He was betrayed; on Friday, crucified. That made an impression on him and on me. What a legacy his *yiayia* left!

We are reminded in the Triodion [the service book that covers from Publican & Pharisee to Holy Saturday evening] that Adam and Even lost paradise because they failed to keep the fast. During Lent we are called to gain paradise by keeping the fast! [We have several lenten seasons and fast days. \*See below.]

We're not asked to sacrifice our lives as martyrs once did, just our hearts! We are invited to offer our lives and lifestyle. We are asked to be obedient, an unpopular word in today's world.

As Orthodox parents we've been given a guidebook... the guidance of the Church, which is tried and true and has worked for centuries. These guidelines have not fallen out of fashion as some theories of psychology.

I find it very interesting that those embracing Orthodox Christianity as adults desire the "whole package" of Orthodoxy rather than live a "salad bar", pick-and-choose type of faith. My friend Joan [not her real name], who recently embraced Orthodoxy, asked me about fasting guidelines for herself and her young son. I shared what we had done as a family over the years and encouraged her to consider starting him out fasting from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays and during Lent omit milk on these days. There wasn't any question in Joan's mind that she and her son would fast. Rather, the question was how to begin.

It is important to Joan that she do what the Church asks of her. Although she came from another Christian background, Joan needed and wanted the spiritual guidance she found in the Orthodox

Church. Now she's looking forward to her first Lent, Holy Week, and Pascha. She wants to do it as right as she can. Our parish study group has encouraged Joan to grow in increments, just as she would have done had she been reared in a functioning Orthodox home.

In **The Orthodox Christian Life Book** [compiled by the Philoptochos of St. Catherine Greek Orthodox Church, Denver, Colorado, and available from Light & Life Publishing, p. 43] the following basic guidelines [do's and don'ts] are given for fasting:

"Our Lord asked us to pray, fast, and do charitable works; when we fast we must:

- Do without certain foods.
- Do with less food.
- Eat natural foods, fruit, vegetables, and simply cooked foods.
- Eat in a limited fashion to sustain our lives and clear out toxic wastes in our body systems.
- Avoid the following foods prescribed by the Church during all strict fasts:
  - a. Meats & Poultry
  - b. Dairy Products
  - c. Oils
  - d. Fish (except shellfish)
  - e. liquor
- Do not advertise; it makes your fast worthless.
- Do not stuff ourselves with allowable foods.
- Do not complain about not eating or being hungry.
- Those who have small children and those who are on a physician's diet should speak to their Father Confessor for authorization to modify the fasting rules."

Why do we do all this? Fr. Anthony Coniaris discusses this issue in his book *Making God Real In The Orthodox Christian Home* [pp. 51-52; available from Light & Life Publishing]. "The purpose of fasting is threefold: (1) It helps us concentrate more on prayer. A full stomach is not as conducive to prayer as one not so full. [Ed. Think about how we feel after a sumptuous Thanksgiving dinner.] (2) Fasting helps strengthen our will power. By learning to say "no" to certain types of food, we shall find it easier to say "no" to temptations. (3) Fasting is a way of helping us identify with those who hunger and provide food for them. (4) Jesus fasted. He tells us in the Bible, 'When you fast...' He does not say, 'If you fast...' He expects us to fast.

"An early Christian, Aristides, wrote, 'If there is a poor person among the Christians and they do not have the means to help him, they fast two or three days and give the food they have saved through fasting to the hungry person.'

"Orthodox Christians are called upon to fast not only for reasons of self-control and prayer, but also for reasons of love: to deny ourselves something that we may share what we have saved with a needy person.

"One family decided to have a meal of just rice once a week since that is the diet of millions of underprivileged in the world. Of course, the rice was fancied up a bit. It was not watered down to a thin gruel as in the underprivileged countries. When Lent was over, this same family decided to continue once every month the practice of serving only rice for dinner. The money they saved was placed in a special envelope to be given through their Church to the world's hungry. They could have obtained the money by cutting out some luxury but they felt that the rice meal helped them identify with those they wished to help."

So for all of us to get the most from the Lenten season, there is a need to determine our family's "Rule" and to quote Captain Picard, "Make it so." Perhaps your parish Church School could sponsor a project for the Lenten period to benefit IOCC (International Orthodox Christian Charities), the Orthodox Mission Center, Project Mexico, a local ministry that helps the homeless...). If not, do it as a family Lenten project. Either way you emphasize helping others in the name of our Lord, and reinforce that we are to be good stewards of the many gifts God has given us.

I hope you and your family have a blessed and spiritual Lenten season.

\*The other Lenten periods are:

- the Nativity or St. Philip's Fast from November 15 (November 28) through December 24 (January 6)
- the Theotokos Fast from August 1-15 (August 14-27)
- SS. Peter & Paul, from the day after All Saints Sunday through June 28 (July 11)
- the Elevation of the Cross on September 14 (September 27)
- the beheading of St. John the Baptist on August 29 (September 11)

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