

## ASCETIC DISCIPLINE ▪ ASCETIC PRACTICES ▪ FASTING

Asceticism is aimed at breaking the dominance of our desires in order to focus on God and his teachings and implement them. We engage in ascetic practices to become free from our passions.

**Why is fasting such an important ascetic discipline?** The desire for food is one of our most basic desires.

There is nothing inherently bad about food or the desire to eat. On the contrary, it is good. *But* it is good only when we control our eating, not when eating controls us.

St. Gregory of Sinai in the *Philokalia* mentions three degrees of eating: abstinence, adequacy, and overindulgence.

**To abstain** means to remain a little hungry after eating; to **eat adequately** means neither to feel hungry nor weighed down.

However, **overindulgence**, or eating beyond satisfaction, quickly becomes the open door through which gluttony enters in to overtake us. St. Gregory teaches that fasting helps control gluttony. And when we control gluttony, we will be able to control lust, greed, and other destructive passions. In this way, fasting becomes a fundamental discipline.

- Gluttony is an excessive craving for food. Lust is an excessive craving for anything. Greed is an excessive desire to accumulate things. Can you see how these are related?

Lust and greed are never satisfied, as St. James says: *"Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain"* (James 4:1-2).

**Why are gluttony, lust, and greed sins?** Because they control our will and separate us from God. However, control over our desire for food leads to control of all these other desires.

It is easy to be gluttonous in an affluent society where everything is at our fingertips, and we enjoy an abundance of whatever our hearts desire. Observe a child's eating habits. Look at our overweight population and all the associated disease. Notice the general lack of eating discipline. Satisfying our every desire is stimulated every time we see an advertisement, especially when it's about food and drink. It is the lack of self-control, or self-discipline, that is at the root of gluttony. We are so easily tempted.

St. James adds insightfully, "*Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed*" (James 1:14).

## **Church Fasting Guidelines**

Generally, there are four categories, or levels of rigor, with fasting. The first level is abstention from meat (including poultry). At the next level we also abstain from all dairy products like milk, butter, and cheese. The third level is to abstain from fish. And the fourth level is abstention from wine and oil.

During the strict fast we abstain from all four categories. This will also affect our cooking since we do not have oil to cook with.

On some fasting days the church gives special allowances for wine and oil, and/or fish. When we pay attention to the church calendar we will learn how and when to fast. This way our fasting unites us to the church community and doesn't become something arbitrary or individualistic.

Additionally, fasting is modified for children, for pregnant and nursing mothers, whenever travelling, ill, or when receiving hospitality from others. Those on certain medications or that have health considerations requiring a certain pattern of eating will adjust their fasting. Make these adjustments after getting the blessing of your priest or spiritual father so it doesn't become something arbitrary or individualistic.

## **For Consideration**

- Fasting foods should be simple and plain, not extravagant, requiring less effort to prepare.
- Fasting gives us a much-needed break from our automatic response to food.
- Fasting is a reminder to always give thanks to the Lord who provides for us.
- Fasting helps us grow spiritually stronger because it increases our ability for self-control. As the Apostle Paul tells us: "*The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 14:7).

**In conclusion**, the point of fasting is not only to avoid certain foods, but also to avoid the control we allow food to have over us by being obedient to the Church's rule for fasting. If we can't discipline ourselves in terms of what goes into our mouths, we will hardly be in a position to discipline ourselves with regard to what comes out of our mouths.