

The What, Who, Why, When, and Where of Fasting

Rev. Sebastian Carnazzo, steliasmelkite.org

What: Fasting is the practice of eating less quantity of food or completely abstaining from food, or certain types of food, at certain times.

Who: Christians have been fasting from the beginning. Jesus fasted (Matt 4:2), his disciples fasted (Matt 6:16-18), and he said that his disciples would fast until his return (Matt 9:15). Jesus taught that there are some evils that can only be done away with through prayer and fasting (Matt 17:21). Hence, the early Church fasted during the time of the Apostles (Acts 13:3; 14:23) and has continued until today. Christians have always fasted. To what degree someone is able to fast or abstain from certain things depends on age and physical health, but there is no way out of it. If you are a Christian you should fast!

Why: Many people think that fasting makes God happy because he likes to see us suffering. That's impossible. First of all, God desires your happiness. Second, God doesn't change. You can't make him happy or sad. Whether you fast or not, it doesn't change God, it changes you. Think of it like spiritual exercises or calisthenics! When you fast you **choose not** to eat certain things or at certain times. This strengthens your willpower. The more you do this the stronger your willpower becomes. Then, when you encounter somethings that is evil, a temptation to sin, you have the strength to **choose not** to sin. Fasting does not change God, it changes you!

When: From the early Church, Christians have been fasting **weekly**, during certain **times in the year**, and during **periods of personal trial**. During the time of Jesus, Jews fasted on Mondays and Thursdays each week because, as far as can be discerned, they believed that Moses went up to get the Torah on the mountain on Thursday and came back down on Monday (Luke 18:12). Christians began fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, because these are the days when Jesus was handed over (Wednesday) and crucified (Friday). This practice developed during apostolic times (Didache 8:1) and has continued to today. Over the first few centuries of the Church, larger fasting periods developed as well, of which there are four: The Great Fast in preparation for Pascha, the Apostles Fast, in preparation for the Feast of Peter and Paul, the Dormition Fast, in preparation for the Dormition, and the Nativity Fast, in preparation for the Nativity. Finally, individual Christians, Christian Churches, Christian Communities, also sometimes fast during times of prayer in preparation for coming times of difficulty.

Where: Fasting is something we do for our own spiritual development. As Jesus said, when we fast, we should go about our normal daily routine, and there should not be any indication to those outside that we are fasting (Matt 6:16-18). Otherwise, we could easily fall into pride, and then the whole purpose of fasting, avoidance of sin, has been lost. At home at meal time, when the whole family is fasting, meals are taken together and fasting is a united effort that strengthens the family bond and encourages each member to keep up the effort. This is like friends or family members committing to go out and exercise together each day. We can also do this when we are alone, taking a meal at lunch at the cafeteria, or even out to lunch with some co-workers, as long as we are careful not to draw any attention to ourselves. It is quite easy to choose a shrimp salad or vegetable soup without anyone taking notice. But be careful. If someone who is not keeping the Fast invites you to dinner, and you are inclined to go, if nothing else but to be polite, you should eat whatever is put before you (1 Cor 10:27). Remember, charity in all things! And so even this can strengthen you. How so? If you have been keeping the fast without fail, and then sometime during the fast you are in a situation where you must break the fast for a moment, such as the above example, it can also keep you from falling into pride, since you cannot say to yourself at the end of the fast, "Look how strong you are! You did it, you kept the Fast! Wow, you must be really spiritual!" Remember, fasting is to help us avoid sin, and pride is the greatest sin of all!

May God bless you now and in a special way during the coming Fast!