

On Lent

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The joyful Lent is here again. Let us approach it with joy and eagerness. This season nourishes us spiritually, purifying us to rise to the level of life worthy of human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

In our Christian circles, Lent is often approached as a mere religious obligation or abstinence from certain foods and drinks for a period of time. In reality, it is an intensive and liberating spiritual exercise when believers lay aside their worldly concerns and replace them with a yearning for the heavenly realms and living according to their faith.

The idea of liberating ourselves from the ties that bind and enslave us to earthly things, which prevent us from realizing our full humanity and purpose of our existence, is crucial to our understanding of Lent. If we focus on minimizing the quantity and quality of food, it is precisely because this helps free us from a fundamental passion that grips human nature, namely gluttony. As St. John Climacus said: "I wonder if anyone has gotten free of this master before settling in the grave" (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 14:1).

Overcoming gluttony must lead us to freedom from other things that are not essential to our lives. This cannot be achieved if we are satisfied to limit fasting to food. Those who fast according to the rules of the Church experience how much lighter their bodies become as they approach Pascha. This lightness leads believers to more personal and communal prayer, to spreading the spirit of asceticism to many aspects of their daily lives, and to maximizing opportunities to perform acts of love in a variety of forms and ways, according to the ability of each believer.

A very important liturgical book that Orthodox believers cannot do without during Lent is the *Triodion*. It is the book for the period from the four weeks leading up to Lent, through all the weeks of Lent and Holy Week, until Holy Pascha. The prayers and hymns in this essential book are organized by the daily services of Orthros, Vespers, and the Sixth Hour. Reading it daily helps us fast properly according to Orthodox spirituality.

Some may make the mistake of limiting fasting to food, and some may make the mistake of limiting fasting to nice and civilized behaviors. Both attitudes are

incomplete, and each dimension forgets the other. Most dangerously, these incomplete and misunderstood practices ignore the spirit and purpose of fasting.

The eschatological dimension of the Christian faith is essential, and to forget or neglect it amputates the Christian faith from its purpose and goal. What is the meaning of salvation if our lives are limited to these short years we are given on earth? What is salvation if we do not hope for resurrection and life in the age to come, and therefore do not work and strive for it?

In Lent, we experience, both physically and practically, our longing for the life to come. Fasting keeps our vigilance alive lest we forget that we are created for eternity and life in the presence of God, where we move "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18), as the Apostle Paul teaches us. Fasting is a yearning and desire for a life beyond the mortal, physical life. It is an experience of death before it happens, and therefore an exercise to defeat fear of it. We should not be surprised when we read or hear about believers who have been called "fasters" because of the many fasts that have shaped their entire lives. These are saints whose longing for God and life with Him led them to abandon everything else and to be satisfied with God alone, neglecting all earthly things and turning to the heavenly ones.

Love is also one of the authentic dimensions of fasting as practiced by Christians since the beginning of Christianity. When someone was in distress, they would call for a fast on a specific day and bring the cost savings of that day's meals to the distressed person at church on Sunday morning. This is why the prayers and hymns of the *Triodion* often urge charity.

We also need to fast from so many things in these distracting times, such as television, social media, and entertainment, instead devoting the time we spend on them to more spiritual readings, prayer, and acts of love. This is how we experience Lent in its spirit and not just in its rules.

If in our Lent we experience true freedom, we experience the saying that "God alone is enough." If we experience true freedom, then we have entered into His spirituality, beauty and joy.