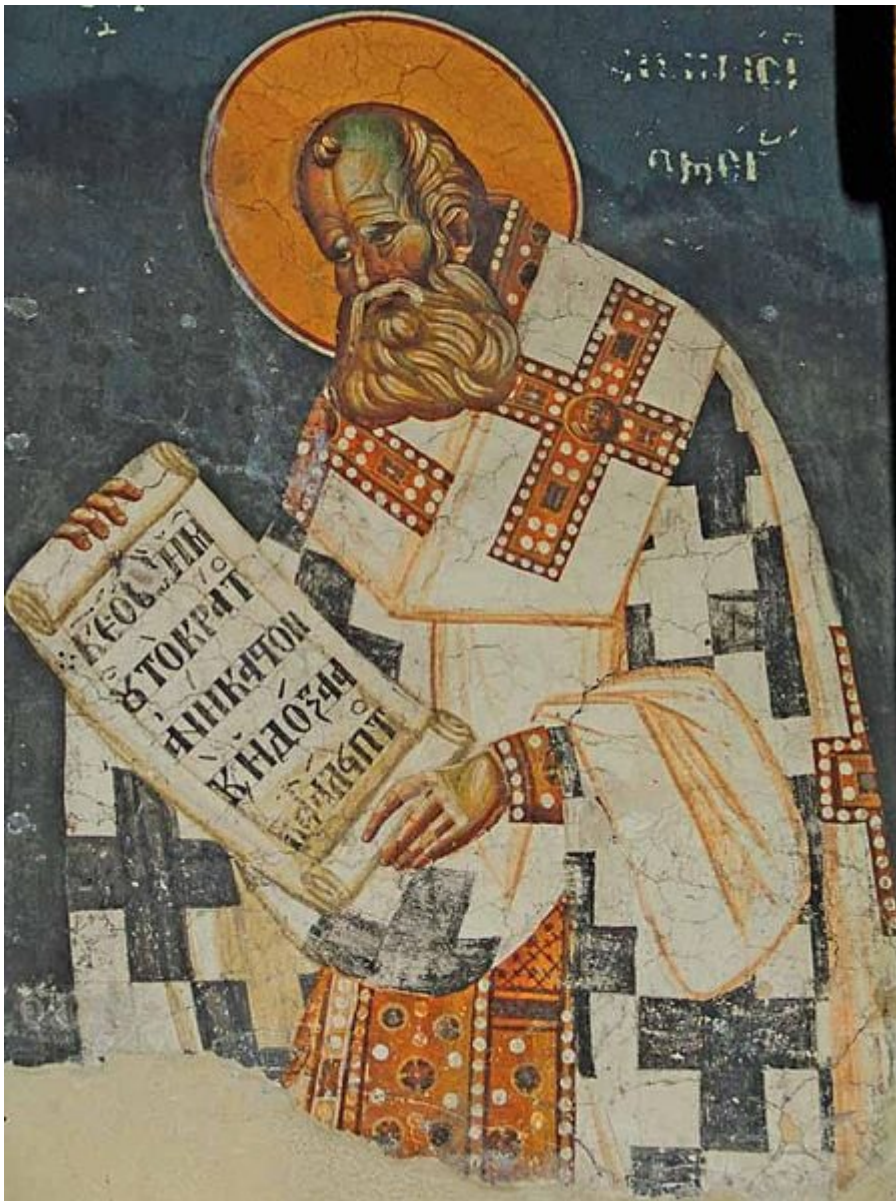


17 Νοεμβρίου 2016

## Why Fast (Fr. Stephen Powley)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

Image not found or type unknown



*St. Athanasios the Great*

“Hey I’m in school... or I am working 50 hours a week... or I’m too old.... I can’t really be expected to keep any kind of fast can I? Heard any of those before? Me

too... So are those legitimate excuses? Maybe...because in Orthodoxy, no one forces you to fast. It is truly a matter of your own heart before the Lord and what you are hoping to do with your spiritual life.

Some of you readers may not be familiar with the Orthodox Faith or with our practice of fasting. Jesus established fasting as a normal part of the life of those who would follow Him as He said: "When you fast..." (Matthew 6:16-18). He didn't say "If", but rather "When"...showing that fasting is to be a normal part of our Christian life. The early Church began fasting on Wednesdays (remembering the Lord's betrayal) and on Fridays (remembering His crucifixion). The early Church also established fasting prior to celebrating certain feast days. The two biggest of these would be the Lord's Birth and His Glorious Resurrection. These fasts in the early Church were not from all food and drink, but were from certain foods. It might include any of the following: no meat, dairy products, or olive oil... and no wine to drink. Throughout the centuries, Orthodox Christians have continued this practice of fasting. Fasting dates and the foods to abstain from are reflected on our calendars, so that those who participate know that Orthodox around the world are keeping the same fast. That sense of unity around the world is an awesome thing to experience. Orthodoxy is not a legalistic religion and fasting is not meant to be a legalistic experience. The choice is always ours to make.

The Lord, through His Church, calls us to deny ourselves and to not eat certain foods during four major fast times each year and on most Wednesdays and Fridays. Why would the Lord ask this of us? We know that He loves us and desires the very best for our lives. The Lord's very best and our idea of what is the very best usually seem to disagree. When I was growing up, I would have loved to eat nothing but chocolate candy and ice cream for supper each night, but my Mom knew what was best for me and directed me to eat right. With Mom, I didn't exactly have a choice. But the Lord puts His best plan before us and invites us to participate; we don't have to do it. When we do participate with the Lord in something, we usually find ourselves blessed in ways we never could have imagined.



### Foods we fast from

I am a retired Prison Chaplain. I had the great privilege of being a spectator of God at work transforming some of the lives of the “worst of the worst” criminals in our country. Several years ago two of the men were about to participate in fasting for the first time since becoming Orthodox. They were determined to keep the fast very strictly. In this particular prison, their food is delivered to their cells on a tray. There is no picking and choosing from a cafeteria line. So to fast strictly is a very difficult endeavor. Both men told me separately that they were going to concentrate their fasting and prayers on something very personal. One man had not had contact with his family in over 20 years. The other had no family and was very lonely; he simply wanted someone on the outside with whom he could have contact. Midway through the Fast, the first man received a letter from his sister! This was his first contact with her in over 20 years! She had tracked him down and wrote to ask him if he would like to re-establish communication with her. Soon after that one, the second man also received a letter from someone he didn’t even know. They had gotten his name from someone else and wrote to ask him if he could use a pen pal. Needless to say, those two hold the fasting in the highest regard and can’t wait to begin fasting each year.

I mentioned the above stories to another Orthodox man at that prison. He thought for a moment and then began smiling from ear to ear. He said, "I am going to fast and pray that God will enable me to love Him as I should love Him and that He will place a love for others in my heart. I have never been able to love the way I know

God wants me to!” As a spectator in the wonderful things that God did in that place, I have no doubts that this man was blessed beyond his wildest dreams!! Listen to what St. Athanasius has to say about fasting in his treatise, “On Virginity”: **“Fasting cures ills and dries up bodily tumors, casts out demons, and turns away evil thoughts; it makes the mind brighter, the heart clean, and the body holy; and it presents man before the Throne of God.”** Wow...I am thinking that fasting may be for everyone!

In the Philokalia, volume 1, St. John Cassian’s treatise “On the Eight Vices” is found. It is no small matter that he begins with the very issue of fasting. Many of the fathers of our Church have taught us that the key to overcoming sin in our lives begins with fasting. Remember the original temptation in the Garden of Eden: FOOD! St. John writes: **“Self-control and fasting are especially important for bringing about that specific purity of soul which comes through restraint and moderation. No one whose stomach is full can fight mentally against the demon of unchastity. Our initial struggle therefore must be to gain control of our stomach and to bring our body into subjection.”**

One thing I remind the Orthodox men in prison about is that these times of fasting are not simply about food and the physical body. We also fast from sin! St. John Chrysostomos (+407) wrote in “Concerning the Statutes”: **“The honor of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices...Do you fast? Give me proof of your works! If you see a poor man, take pity on him! If you see an enemy, be reconciled to him! If you see a friend gaining honor, do not envy him! If you see a beautiful woman (or a handsome man ladies), pass her (him) by! For let not the mouth only fast, but also the eye, and the ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all the members of our bodies.”** Our ultimate calling is to a genuine and fuller kind of fast that truly pleases God and will be a spiritual springboard in our lives!





*Ss John Chrysostom and Paul*

Fasting from food brings us to a place that we can begin to overcome other issues in our lives that are hindering our spiritual progress. St. Leo, Bishop of Rome (+461) writes on fasting in "Sermon 42": **"By abstaining from the lawful (food), resistance becomes easier to the unlawful (sin)... The greater advantages of this virtue belong to the chastity of the soul, which not only crushes the lusts of the flesh, but also despises the vanities of worldly wisdom."** As many men in prison have come to understand, fasting is one of the great keys to the spiritual life. St. Cyril of Jerusalem (+386) in "The Catechetical Lectures" explains further: **"For we fast by abstaining from wine and meat, not because we abhor them as abominations, but because we look for our reward; that having scorned things sensible, we may enjoy a spiritual and intellectual feast."** When we think of the rewards of fasting, the last on the list should be losing weight. That will happen (I lose around 15 lbs

every Great Lent) but we should think about the spiritual rewards that await us. Like my dear brother in prison, perhaps I should be dedicating this fast to learning to love God more and love others more. I honestly cannot think of purer reason to fast.

One aspect of fasting that the men in prison absolutely love is the «corporate» sense of the fast. They realize that when they are fasting during one of the lenten seasons or even on a Wednesday or Friday, they are joining with Orthodox Christians around the world. They are praying and fasting with the monks on Mt. Athos and St. Katherine's on Mt. Sinai...they are joining hearts in prayer with Russians, Arabs, Greeks, etc. in all parts of this earth. The Holy Scriptures speak of our prayers rising to God as incense. These men have a vision of their prayers during these fasting times joining the prayers of Orthodox around the globe...and together those prayers rise to God as a sweet odor of fine incense. As Orthodox Christians we do not fast alone or pray alone. We are a part of God's glorious Church. Can you imagine the joy that brings a man fasting and praying in the bowels of a prison? Truly that great darkness has been pierced with a bright light that cannot be dimmed! When you choose to fast, please remember that you too are fasting and praying with these precious men in prison as well as the rest of the Church around the world.

As said in the beginning of this article, the choice is totally ours when it comes to fasting. No one is forcing us. We are free to fast or to eat steak and ice cream for every meal through each fasting time. That's the way God is...our relationship with Him is a matter of our free will. He has shown us His love in providing a way to be His children on this earth and to live with Him eternally in His Kingdom. How do we show Him our love...by doing the things He asks of us to the best of our abilities. The ultimate answer to the question, "Why Fast?", is simply because we love our Lord. St. Paul wrote these wonderful words to the Church in Corinth: **"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him"** (1 Corinthians 2:9). What will happen to you if you fast as the Lord has called you to...only God knows! I am confident that you will never regret it!! May it be blessed!!!

*Fr. Stephen is a priest of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America and serves as the Proistamenos at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Pueblo, CO. He also serves as the Assistant Director for Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry. Fr. Stephen served as a Prison Chaplain for almost 26 years before retiring in August of 2010.*