

Some thoughts on Great Lent (Metropolitan Ioïl (Frangkakos) of Edessa, Pella, and Almopia.)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



It's well known that, in this period, we have two fasts. There are seven weeks of strict fasting, preceded by Cheese-fare week, making eight weeks in all. For many, this is a pleasant and desirable time, for others it's difficult and for others again it's not at all pleasant. We'll try to offer a few thoughts on this period, as the fathers of the Church have described it.

Let's first recall Saint John the Damascan, who makes a general observation concerning holy Lent. He says to all of us: 'Do not weaken the fast; for it contains the imitation of the way of life of Christ'. This is an important observation. Christ doesn't weaken, that is, take the power away from the fast. To put it another way, Saint John doesn't disdain Great Lent. He doesn't say there's something wrong with this period, he doesn't mock the fast of the Church, he doesn't dishonour it, he's not displeased that it's arrived, he doesn't hope that it passes quickly, he doesn't break the fast ostentatiously and without good reason, nor does he argue that times have changed and so must we.



Great Lent is an imitation of the life of Christ. After His baptism, He went out into the wilderness and there He 'fasted for forty days and nights and then was hungry' (Matth. 4, 2). Christ was a perfect human person and He didn't have the impulse to sin within Him, but He needed to give us model of life. We had to have an image of asceticism before us in order to achieve our aim, which is our union with God. During this period, He was also tempted by the devil and, in the course of His temptations, 'the angels served Him' (Mark 1, 13). This time of trial for the Lord has a great deal to teach us.

Christ was trained in a manner of speaking, during His temptations, through fasting. The devil would fall upon Him like a terrible storm, but in all His trials He emerged victorious. The same is true of the faithful. We have many temptations in our life. We need to be trained. The period of the fast is a spiritual training for Christians. We learn to fight. Our Lord showed us the way, since He was tempted first.

During the time of His fasting, Christ was tempted and emerged victorious. We, the faithful are also tempted. Why does God allow temptations? To show us that we're above them. To humble us. For the demon to know that we've abandoned him. For us to live ascetically. To acquire clear experience of the gifts of God. The angels of the Lord support those who're engaged in the struggle.

The devil tempted Christ at the time of His fasting not only in a particular manner,

but also in a particular place. Isolation and solitude are often weapons of the devil. An example of this is Eve, whom he tempted when she was apart from Adam. Isolation also sometimes brings monotony, sloth, hunger and anguish. So it's at the time of fasting that the devil takes heart and attacks us. But when he sees us together with many others and disciplined, he doesn't have the heart (writes Saint John Chrysostom) to do us any great harm. This is why, during the time of the fast, we should all attend the Church services and support one another, encourage each other to realize that we're not alone in the struggle but that we have the whole of the Church with us. The Lord was encouraged by the angels in heaven. So we begin to understand the great benefit we derive from holy Lent.

Then another Saint of our Church, John Chrysostom, writes that at the time of great Lent, we trade in spiritual wares and amass a wealth of virtues. He emphasizes that it's no great achievement simply to get through the days of the fast, but that what's important is that we should correct our failings and be cleansed of our transgressions.

It's common for people to ask, says Saint John, how many weeks others have fasted. Some will answer 'Two', others 'Three' and others 'All the weeks in Lent'. But what's the benefit in just getting through the time of fasting, unless we have virtuous achievements to show for it?

Should anyone say that they fasted all through Lent, say that you had an enemy and became reconciled with them, that you were in the habit of condemning other people, but that you stopped, that you used to swear, but you no longer do. We won't derive any benefit from the fast if all we do is get through it any old way. If we just fast from food, when the forty days are up, the fast ends. But if we abstain from sins, the fast will end, the other abstinence (from sins) will remain and the benefit to us will be enduring, bringing no small reward even here, even before the Kingdom of Heaven.

So we see that great Lent isn't a period only for abstinence from food, but is also an opportunity to practice virtue. When we achieve this, we'll be able, on the Lord's day, to approach the spiritual table, that is the divine Eucharist, and make our communion. Our attendance at the mystery of life is a good enough motive to inspire us in our spiritual efforts.

Saint Gregory the Theologian stresses that the fast is also cleansing for us. Before the great day of Easter, it's a pre-feast cleansing. We die with Christ. Just as the Lord mortified His flesh for the salvation of the world, so we Christians mortify our passions for our own salvation. The Lord fasted just before His temptations; we do

so before Easter.

With this in mind, let us enter the arena of the great Fast to our great benefit.