

Fasting During Great Lent: A Practical Approach

If your health and circumstances are somewhat “normal” you may find these following recommendations helpful. Remember that fasting does not have to be an “all-or-nothing” endeavor. If fasting strictly is beyond your reach, don’t give up! Do something positive and enter the Lenten journey, as you are able. Certainly, you must not sacrifice your health and physical well-being in the process. But the effort you put forth ought to be a challenge to your “passions” for food and material satisfactions. You may have to be a little creative to adapt these suggestions to your unique situation. That’s all right. The goal must be remembered: to liberate ourselves from the material in order that the spirit may grow. It implies an increase in prayer life, spiritual reflection, and an attitude of repentance. Fasting is, in other words, part of the Lenten journey when properly tied to the other disciplines (attending worship, personal prayer, acts of charity, etc). Fasting alone, done as an act of fulfilling a law or regulation, will not bring forth the fruits we desire. The Church warns us not to approach fasting in a “legalistic” way, and Canon Law directs that in some cases -- pregnant women, the seriously ill, travelers -- fasting be excused entirely or modified appropriately. As with all matters of spiritual progress, consult with your pastor.

Here are some approaches to consider. Don’t forget -- the “strict, ascetic fast” is the definitive rule of the Church regarding fasting. These approaches do not change the rule of fasting nor do they create several “ways” of fasting. They are meant as practical “building blocks” toward fulfilling the rule of fasting. Read each approach carefully -- each builds upon the previous one.

1) **“A HUMBLE BEGINNING”** For those who have never fasted before, or who find such efforts extremely difficult, **this is a good place to start**. First, be sure to set aside your meal time as a special moment of thanksgiving and communion with God. No television or radio! Begin, and end, with a short prayer. Use the time to communicate lovingly with family members or to quietly reflect on the presence of God in your life. Refrain from eating meat and meat products on Wednesdays and Fridays (note: this is the recommended discipline for Orthodox Christians throughout the year, but if you are not currently fasting this is a place to begin!) from the beginning of Lent until after the Easter Liturgy.

2) **“A BASIC FAST”** Refrain from eating meat & meat products for all (that is, every day) of Great Lent.

3) **“FASTING WITH GREATER DISCIPLINE”** Follow the “basic fast” but also refrain from animal/dairy products on Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent. These items include: milk, cheese, eggs, butter, cream, yogurt, and so on.

4) **“FASTING WITH FERVOR”** Extend the effort and refrain from animal/dairy products for the duration of Great Lent. This can be modified by allowing dairy products on the weekends. Obviously, this type of fasting must be approached cautiously. Children need to be provided with a nutritionally balanced diet appropriate to their growth and development needs. Be reasonable. Consult some of the very fine cookbooks available on vegetarian eating. If in doubt, speak to your pastor, a physician, nutritional specialist, or others who may be of assistance.

5) **“FASTING WITH ASCETIC STRICTNESS”** This obviously requires much planning, commitment, and maturity. It includes everything in “fasting with fervor” and also refrains from fish, oil, wine/alcohol, and normally limits the number of “warm” meals to one a day.