

## FASTING

On Boon Berekendan, the eve of the fasting season of Lent, the Gospel reading was Matthew 6:1-21 where Jesus talks about the three essential elements of Christian spirituality: prayer, alms-giving, and fasting.

On the Armenian Church calendar, in addition to Lent, every Wednesday and Friday are designated as fasting days. There are also about twelve weeks of fasting preceding the major feasts and some seasons. And we fast always before receiving Holy Communion, the Holy Body and Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The main purpose of fasting is to gain mastery over our bodies and to come closer to God in our relationship with Him as our Creator. Our Church Fathers emphasize that as important as fasting is for the spiritual life it is not enough just to fast from certain foods. Prayer and alms-giving must accompany fasting.

There are various levels of fasting:

1. Strict fasting-when a person abstains from every food except bread, salt and water. The Armenian word for this form of fasting is *aghoohats*-սղմխաց, bread and salt. This form of fasting was observed on weekdays of Lent. Now it is abandoned almost entirely, except may be for the week of the Fast of the Catechumen, popularly known as the Fast of St. Sarkis.

2. The most commonly observed form of fasting is the vegetarian fast, i.e. observing a purely vegetarian diet. In this form of fasting one abstains from all animal meats and animal products. This is the fasting that we observe on Church designated fasting days by satisfying ourselves with vegetables and grains only, and by abstaining from all animal products such as eggs, butter, dairy and similar animal by-products. This is the fasting regimen for weekdays of Lent and other fasting days of the year, except on Saturdays and Sundays.

3. The third form of fasting is not really fasting in the strict sense of the word, but it is a form of fasting nevertheless as we fast from poultry and other meats. This is called *navagadik-nauakatiq* in Armenian. In this form of fasting one can eat animal products and fish. This form of fasting is observed on Saturdays and Sundays during Lent and on the other designated fasting weeks during the liturgical year.

One word of caution: fasting rules are suspended for persons who are unable to fast due to medical reasons. In that case one is encouraged to fast as much as possible.

In our life circumstances it may be very difficult to observe the fasting rules of the Church as strictly as the canons require. Therefore, rather than abandon all fasting, we are encouraged to fast as much as we can and set our own designated days for observing the fast, e.g. one may choose to fast one, two, or three designated days a week. The most important thing to remember is that fasting is not the same as dieting for other health related reasons. Christian fasting is a spiritual endeavor and, as our Lord Jesus Christ emphasizes, it must be accompanied by increased prayer and alms-giving.

May our Lord be your companion in your spiritual journey.

