

SOME REFLECTIONS ON FASTING

Fasting, or more correctly, the practice of abstinence for certain days and certain periods of the year, has long caused difficulty in the minds of many Orthodox Christians [including Armenians]. In general, it is safe to say that the practice and idea of fasting is largely ignored. Many people generally dismiss fasting with the rather simple and naive: "This is the twenty-first century; those rules were made for the past and simpler days," or worse, "those are man-made rules," as if being "man-made" was by definition "junk." Nonsense!

Nonetheless, in spite of the practice of most people, we must take the practice of fasting seriously, if for no other reason than that other people, throughout Christian history, have taken it seriously. It is valuable here to consider not so much *how* to fast, as *why* fast. This deeper understanding of the reason for this practice in Christianity will help us in determining our own fasting practices.

We must first admit that fasting has a firm foundation in Scripture and in the Tradition of the Church, as well as the practice of the Jewish community which gave birth to the Church. We know, for instance, that Jesus fasted, that the disciples of John the Baptist fasted, and that Jesus said that "prayer and fasting" were necessary for casting out certain evils.

To this emphasis we must add a certain otherworldly emphasis in

Jesus' teaching (*Matthew 6:19-21*):

Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be.

In spite of the great love which Jesus and his Church have demonstrated for the world and life in the world, there is in Christianity a reservation about the world and human life as it is now. The Church calls the world "fallen" in all its aspects, it is in some way separated voluntarily from the love and life of God, its creator. Fasting must be seen in this light—"Seek first the kingdom of God and all else will be added." It is a matter of priority. Fasting cannot be separated from a struggle of what the world is. There is something about fasting, something about refusing, as it were, to make a total investment in the world as it is, that is associated with the struggle to build the Kingdom of God.

Our Lord says, "lay not up treasure on earth" and fasting is in effect the reminder that our heart cannot be invested, like our money, in the world. We all know the feeling we have for something when we have an investment in it. People always try to protect their investment. This is natural. That is



what our Lord meant! Here we find a rejection of the world, not in an absolute sense, but in a relative sense. The world in itself is valuable only when it is seen in its relationship to God. Since the world is in effect separated from God, freely, then it cannot be fully normal and the Church says limit your participation in the life of the world, not because it is evil, but because it in itself is limited.

Food is the most obvious example. Everyone agrees that eating, after breathing, is the most necessary and normal activity of our life. It is in this area, which is regarded in a worldly sense as normal, that the Church says stop! think! question everything which the world calls normal and necessary, because the world itself is "abnormal." That is, it is abnormal as it now exists apart from God's love. But fasting is only

