

Poon Paregentan (Beginning of Lent)

The principles and practices of Lent in the Armenian Church are deeply rooted in the Bible, the ancient Christian traditions, the life-example of Christ and His disciples, and the lives of the great church fathers, all of whom contributed to the establishment of the canons of Lent. The focus of Lent is on "Man the Sinner": on his repentance, his spiritual cleansing, and his eventual salvation.

Here are two biblical passages that elaborate the deeper meaning of Lent:

Even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God. (Joel 2:12-13)

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners, to be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6)

Lent is a very personal spiritual journey. It is a period of sincerity, self-recognition and reflection. Abstinence, moderation and sacrifice frees us for meditation and the realization of the darkness of our world without God. As the prophet Joel advised us, you must "turn towards the Lord...with all your heart"-with honesty and humility. In this way we are able to create a bridge between God and us. Through prayer we communicate with God, express our love, ask for forgiveness. Prayers of the sincere heart are acceptable to God.

Jesus' advice as recorded in Matthew's gospel brings to mind a novel by the Russian writer Anton Chekov, which relates how two thieves attack and kill a street beggar and proceed to tear his garments to distribute amongst themselves. In one of the inner pockets of the suit, one thief finds a piece of bacon. He proceeds to have his first bite, when the other thief, suddenly angered, says, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Today is Friday, a day of fasting!" His friend looks at him in astonishment, but stops eating the bacon, and the two leave the forest without breaking their fast.

The story points out, in a comic way, that fasting by itself has no meaning if you are disobedient or (like the thieves) committing crimes. Fasting during Lent needs to be done in the context of deep reflection on the truth about ourselves, in a spirit of unusual sincerity and honesty. Fasting is, in fact, a companion to prayer: one more way we speak to God from the heart.

The true understanding of Lent rests on a sturdy tripod of prayer, abstinence and charity. Lent reminds us that man is always confronted with choices-choices that lead us to two paths in life. The first path is one of darkness, evil and sin. The second is that of light, God, righteousness and goodness. At the juncture of these two paths stands the fortress of prayer, abstinence and charity, which leads mankind forward to seek perfection. This is the purpose of Great Lent in the Armenian Church.

The Armenian Apostolic Church has ruled on the traditions of Lent by creating canons based on the thought of the apostles. Apostolic Canon #8 reads: "The Apostles ordered and affirmed that the 40 days be set aside as days of abstinence from evil-doing, from sin and from food, preceding [the day] of the passion of our Savior."

The oldest Armenian Lenten traditions hardly allowed for the consumption of any food at all. Indeed, the Armenian Church sometimes refers to Lent as *Aghouhatzk*, meaning "salt and bread," because at one time these elements were the only permitted foods. Over time, Lenten rules have changed to allow any food that does not derive from animals (meat and milk, e.g.). Alcoholic beverages were also forbidden. These rules were based on the Biblical principle that many human vices proceed from eating and drinking.