



Sanctify a Fast



Spiritual Fasting
HIS HOLINESS POPE SHENOUDA III

Sanctify a Fast

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His Holiness Pope Shenouda III

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The Lenten Fraction

*O Sovereign Lord God Almighty
Who sent to the world His Only-Begotten Son
Who taught us the Law and the commandments
written in the Holy Bible,
He taught us that it is through fasting and prayer that
demons go out, when He said that
“this kind does not go out except
by prayer and fasting”.*

*It was through fasting and prayer
that Elijah was lifted up into heaven,
and Daniel was saved from the lions’ den.*

*It was through fasting and prayer
that Moses received the Law and commandments
written by the finger of God.*

*It was through the fasting and prayer
of the people of Nineveh
that God had mercy on them,
forgave them their sins,
and turned away His wrath from them.*

*It was through the fasting and prayer
of the prophets that they foretold the advent of Christ
many generations before His coming.*

*It was through the fasting and prayer
of the Apostles that they preached to all the nations,
converted them to Christianity,
and baptised them in the Name
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Fasting and prayer were practised*

*by the martyrs even to their blood-shed
for the sake of the name of Christ
Who made the good confession before Pontius Pilate.*

*Fasting and prayer were practised
by the righteous, the virtuous and the cross-bearers
so that they dwelt in the mountains and the wildernesses
and the precipices of the earth
out of their great love for Christ the King.*

*May we also fast from every evil
with purity and righteousness,
and come forward and partake
of this holy Sacrifice with thanksgiving,
so that with a pure heart and enlightened soul,
an unashamed face and unfeigned faith,
perfect love and steadfast hope,
with boldness and without fear,
we may call upon You, O God the holy Father
Who are in heaven, and say:*

*Our Father
Who art in heaven
Hallowed be Thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
Through Christ Jesus our Lord
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory
forever. Amen.*



Introduction

Fasting is a vital topic for everyone, since all peoples of all religions on the face of the earth practise it, indicating that fasting was a firmly established dogma of mankind before the separation into nations and peoples. It goes back even to the time of Adam and Eve.

We do not want to address fasting from a dogmatic perspective, but from the spiritual. We would like to speak about the spiritual concept of fasting, and the spiritual way of fasting, because our main concern is your spiritual growth in God's love. Numerous lectures were delivered during and on the subject of fasting, a subset of which we have selected as the material for this book.

Pope Shenouda III



“...and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him”
(Matthew 17:2-3)

The Importance of Fasting

On the Mount of Transfiguration

Three persons stood on the Mount of Transfiguration, each gloriously illumined. Each had excelled in fasting; each had fasted forty days and forty nights. They were Christ the Lord, glory be to Him (Mt.4:2), Moses (Ex.40:28) and Elijah (1Kgs.19:8). Does this glorious scene conceal behind it an important notion—that in subduing the body through fasting, the spirit transfigures, and the body transfigures? Did Christ the Lord choose two of those who fasted to appear with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, to show us that the nature which will be transfigured in eternity will be that which, through fasting, subdued the body?

The Oldest Commandment

Fasting is the oldest commandment known to mankind. The commandment which God gave our father Adam was to abstain from eating a particular fruit from a particular tree (Gen.2:16,17), though he was permitted to eat of all the other kinds. Hence, God set limits for the body which were not to be transgressed. Adam was not free to take of whatever he saw and whatever he desired, but there were certain things in particular from which he must abstain and exercise his will.

Therefore, from the beginning, man had to exercise control over his body. The tree might be “*good for food... pleasant to the eyes, and... desirable*” (Gen.3:6), yet man must abstain from it, and through this abstinence in eating, man transcends the level of the flesh and he transcends the level of matter, and this is the aim of fasting.

Had the First Man succeeded in this test and overcome his body’s desire to eat, and overcome his

senses which saw the tree as “*pleasant to the eyes*”- if he had succeeded in this test, it would have proven that his spirit had overcome the lusts of his flesh. Then he would have been worthy to eat of the Tree of Life. But man was defeated before his flesh. Thus the flesh began to dominate him, and man continued to fall into numerous sins of the flesh, one after the other, to the extent that it became his condemnation to walk according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit (Rom.8:1).

Christ the Lord came to return man to his former state. Since the first man had fallen into the sin of eating from a prohibited fruit, in submission to his flesh, thence Christ began His trials by triumphing over this point in particular, and triumphing over food in general, even the permitted kinds.

Christ the Lord commenced His ministry by fasting, and by rejecting Satan’s temptation to eat for the sustenance of the flesh. The Lord showed Satan that man is not only body but that he has another element, the spirit, and that the food of the spirit is every word proceeding from the mouth of God, saying to him, “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Mt.4:4). This was not a new norm introduced by the New Testament, but an old commandment given to man in the first written Law (Deut.8:3).

The Prophets Fasted

We hear David the Prophet saying, “*I humbled myself with fasting*” (Ps.35:13), “*I wept and chastened my soul with fasting*” (Ps.69:10), and, “*My knees are weak through fasting, and my flesh is feeble through lack of fatness*” (Ps.109:24). He fasted when his son fell ill, entreating his life from the Lord, and in his fasting, he “*lay all night on the ground*” (2Sam.2:19).

Daniel the Prophet fasted (Dan.9:3), as did Ezekiel the Prophet (Ez.4:9). We learn that Nehemiah fasted when he learnt of the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem and the burning down of its gates (Neh.1:3,4). Likewise, Ezra the priest and scribe, fasted for the whole congregation (Eze.8:21), and Anna the Prophetess “*served God with fastings and prayers night and day*” (Lk.2:37).

The Apostles Fasted

In the New Testament, as Christ fasted, so also did His apostles. Regarding their fasting, Christ said, “*Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast*” (Mt.9:15), which they did. Thus the Apostles’ Fast is the oldest and the first fast of the Christian Church.

It is written that Saint Peter the Apostle fasted, became very hungry and desired to eat (Acts 10:10), when he saw the vision regarding the acceptance of the Gentiles. Thus, the revelation to accept the Gentiles into the Faith was given during a period of fasting. Paul the Apostle ministered to the Lord “*in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in sleeplessness, in fastings*” (2Cor.6:5) and it was said of him, “*in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness*” (2Cor.11:27), and that he fasted together with Barnabas (Acts 14:23).

The Holy Spirit spoke to the Apostles whilst they were fasting, as the Holy Bible says, “*As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’*” (Acts 13:2,3). How beautiful is the Lord’s saying to the Apostles about the relationship between fasting and the casting out of demons, “*However, this kind does not go*

out except by prayer and fasting” (Mt.17:21). This is the extent of the power of fasting, causing terror to the demons.

Congregations Fasted

This is a communal fast, in which the hearts of the whole congregation united in humiliation before God, praying together in one spirit and one soul in a communal prayer offered up to God (Acts 4:24), differing from the individual prayer practised in the private room behind closed doors. There are many examples of communal fasts in the Holy Bible, in which all the believers took part together in one spirit, offering one fast to God- the fast of the whole Church. The most obvious example of this was the fasting of the people when they were about to suffer tribulation at the time of Queen Esther, in order that God might have mercy on them (Es.4:3,16). They all fasted, lying in sackcloth and ashes, weeping and wailing, and the Lord answered their prayer and delivered them.

The whole congregation fasted following Ezra the priest’s proclamation of a fast at the river of Ahava, that they might humble themselves before the Lord (Ez.8:21,23). They also assembled with Nehemiah *“with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads”* (Neh.9:1). The whole congregation also fasted at the time of Jehoshaphat (2Chr.20:2), and the Book of Jeremiah tells us of a fast at the time of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah (Jer.36:9). There was also a fast at the time of Joel the Prophet (Joel 3:5). Also, the fasts of the fourth, the fifth, the seventh and the tenth months were communal fasts (Zech.8:19).

The Gentiles Fasted

The most outstanding example of this is the fasting of the people of Nineveh (Jon.3) and how God accepted their fast and forgave them their sins. Another example is the fasting of Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10:30) and how God accepted his fast and sent him Peter the Apostle who preached to him and baptised him. The Old Testament tells us of the fasting of King Darius who fasted at the time of Daniel's trial; he spent the night fasting and no musicians were brought before him (Dan.6:18).

Fasting is a Gift

If we realise the benefits of fasting, we will find it to be a gift from God. Yes, fasting is not merely a Divine commandment, but a Divine gift. It is a gift, a grace and a blessing. God, who created us of body and spirit, knows that we are in need of fasting and that it is necessary for our spiritual life, our spiritual growth and our eternal life. Thus He granted us to know and practise it, and as a kind Father and Wise Teacher, has instructed us to practise it.

Fasting Precedes Every Grace and Ministry

We receive every blessing God offers us through fasting, in order that we be in a spiritual state worthy of receiving such a blessing. Feasts carry certain blessings to us, therefore each feast is preceded by a fast. The Holy Communion brings us a particular blessing, therefore we prepare ourselves to receive It with fasting. Ordinations to the priesthood entail blessings, therefore we receive them whilst fasting. The bishop to be ordained comes forward fasting, the nominated candidate for the priesthood, as well as those participating in the prayers of ordination, approach the ordination fasting.

Fasting Precedes the Ministry

The Lord Christ fasted on the mount for forty days, in solitude with the Father, before commencing His public ministry. In like manner, immediately after his ordination

and before commencing his ministry, the priest is given a period of forty days to spend in fasting and solitude in one of the monasteries. Our fathers the Apostles through fasting began their ministry which commenced with the descent of the Holy Spirit. Fasting also accompanied their ministry so that it be spiritual and acceptable.

The minister fasts in order to be in a spiritual state, to receive help from God and to draw God's compassion to co-work with him. We can see in the life of John the Baptist that he lived his life in fasting and prayer in the wilderness before commencing his ministry, calling people to repentance.

Fasting Precedes the Church Sacraments

+ In the Sacrament of Baptism, the baptised, the priest and the godparent fast in order for the baptised to receive this new spiritual birth. We say the same regarding:

+ The Sacrament of Confirmation, the sacrament of receiving the Holy Spirit after baptism

+ The Sacrament of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion

+ The Sacrament of the Unction of the Sick, with the exception of the sick who are unable to fast

+ The Sacrament of Confession- how beautiful it is when the confessor comes forward to confess his sins whilst fasting and in contrition, though it is not a condition because the Church seeks the sinner's return at any time.

+ As for the Sacrament of Matrimony, fasting is not a condition because Christ the Lord exempted it by saying, *“Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast”* (Mk.2:19). Yet in the Early Church, this Sacrament was celebrated after the morning Raising of Incense, and so the bride and groom were fasting to receive the Holy Communion.

The blessings of the Holy Spirit which the believer receives in the Church Sacraments are, except in exceptional circumstances, received through fasting. And in the same way that the Church recognised fasting in the life of worship and in the life of ministry, she also knew it at the time of tribulation, forming the spiritual rule that:

God Intervenes Through Fasting

God’s intervention through fasting was experienced by Nehemiah, Ezra, Daniel and Queen Esther, for the sake of the whole people. It was experienced by the Church in the fourth century in the very depth of the Arian problem. It has been experienced by every generation, and has become a well-established dogma of the Church, so that in the Litany of the Fraction of the Great Lent, she expresses her firm belief that fasting solves problems.

He who trusts in his own power and intelligence depends on his own power and intelligence, but he who is conscious of his weakness resorts to God in his problems, through fasting. Through fasting, he humbles himself before Him, entreating His mercy and intervention, saying, *“Arise, O Lord God”*, and listening to the Lord’s words, *“For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now I will arise... I will set him in the safety for which he yearns”* (Ps.12:5).

Fasting is a good time in which God's intervention is sought in every problem; a period in which the contrite heart calls out to God, and in which God listens. It is a period in which people draw nearer to God, and God draws nearer to them, listening to their longings and their sighs, and acts. For as long as people are preoccupied with their desires and lusts, with the flesh and the material, they will feel that God is standing afar off. It is not because He wants to be far, but because we have distanced Him, or have rejected Him, or rather have refused to draw near to Him. But during the period of fasting that is united with prayer, man draws near to God and says to Him, "Co-work with Your servant". This cry of the heart to God to come into man's life can be made at any time, but it is more intense, more sincere, and more powerful at the time of fasting. Through true fasting, man can reach God's compassionate Heart. Whoever realises the benefits and efficacies of fasting in his life, and in his relationship with God, rejoices in fasting.

Rejoicing in Fasting

We are not those who whilst fasting, eagerly await the breaking of the fast, but rather, when we break our fast, we eagerly await the time when we shall return to fasting. The spiritual man rejoices in the periods of fasting more than in the feasts in which he can eat and drink. Many long for fasting during the Pentecostal period in which there is neither fasting nor metanoias, and thus greatly rejoice when the Apostles' Fast arrives since they have been deprived of the pleasure of fasting during the holy Pentecostal period.

Those who rejoice in fasting are not sufficed with communal fasts but to them add additional personal fasts. They persuade their father confessors to give them permission to fast, supporting their request with the fact that spirituality is stronger during fasting, in addition to

the physical benefits. Those who seek to reduce the periods of fasting are their own witnesses that they derive neither pleasure nor benefit from fasting.

A Way of Life

Our fathers the monks loved fasting so much so that they made it their way of life. Their whole life, barring feast days, became fastings. In fasting, they found spiritual pleasure, feeling no physical fatigue but rather finding rest, and they became accustomed to it. It was said that in one of the wildernesses, when Great Lent arrived, someone was sent to draw the monks' attention to the commencement of this holy fast. When one of the elders heard him, he said to him, "Which fast are you talking about, my son? I am not aware of any because the days of my life are all the same"; they were all days of fasting.

Saint Paul the Hermit used to eat half a small loaf of bread each evening as a set mode of life. Some monks fasted all the days of their life, such as the monk who said, "Thirty years have passed by in which the sun has never seen me eating". Some monks used to fast for consecutive days. When Saint Macarius of Alexandria visited the monasteries of Saint Pachom, he would eat once a week during Lent. The fasting of those fathers was not limited to the lengthy duration of fasting nor to the number of consecutive days, but asceticism encompassed the type of food they ate as well.

Abba Onuphrius the hermit lived on dates from a palm tree in the place of his solitude. Abba Moses the hermit lived on the grass of the wilderness, as did Abba Pijimi the hermit who used the dew for his drink. This continuous fasting regulated the life of the fathers. In fact, from this aspect, the monks' state became constant; a state in which their bodies and spirits found rest, an

unchanging state to which they accustomed themselves and regulated their lives.

Less fortunate are laymen, who have to transit from one opposite to the other; from fasting and abstaining from food to non-fasting and eating everything they like. They discipline themselves for a time and then allow themselves to eat whatever they wish at others, then they return to abstention, and so oscillating between periods of abstention and lenience; building then destroying, then returning to building followed by destruction to non-arising.

In the period of fasting, a person trains himself on self-control, and then continues to take self-control as a way of life. He controls himself during the days of fasting as well as in the days of non-fasting, despite the difference in the type of food and in the times of eating. Thus fasting will benefit him and be a blessing for his life, being not a punishment but a grace.

The worst penalty that used to be given to a spiritual person was to be ordered by their father confessor to break their fast early or to eat meat or pleasant food. The father confessor did so if he found his spiritual son becoming self-elated thinking that he was beginning to become an ascetic, so he would bring down his haughtiness through making him eat, thence ridding him of the thoughts of vainglory.



*"It was through fasting and prayer
that Elijah was lifted up into heaven"*

(The Lenten Fraction)

Fasting and the Body

What is Fasting?

Fasting is abstaining from food for a certain period of time, followed by eating food free from animal products.

The Period of Abstinence

There should be a period of abstinence, the absence of which would mean that we are merely being vegan, and not that we are fasting. The period of abstinence differs from one person to another for many reasons, among which are differences in people's

- (1) *Spiritual Level:* There is the beginner who cannot fast for long, the trained who can, the spiritually mature who can abstain for longer periods, and the ascetic who can fast for consecutive days as did our fathers the monks, anchorites and hermits.
- (2) *Age:* The level to which a child can fast differs from that of the youth or the mature adult or the elderly.
- (3) *Health:* What a physically strong person can endure differs from what a frail person can. The sick may have a different system as they may be exempt from abstinence depending on their illness and treatments.
- (4) *Type of work:* Some are required to perform strenuous physical tasks whilst others sit at their desks for hours. So the endurance of each differs.

Beneficial and recommended by the spiritual fathers is the system of gradual progress, where a person

commences the first week of fasting with a certain period of abstention, increasing it down the weeks.

There should be a set minimum period of abstention, which can differ from fast to fast. The minimum period of abstention in Great Lent, for example, will be higher than that for other fasts, and the minimum for Holy Week will be higher. Some used to fast continuously from Covenant Thursday to the Easter Holy Mass, and originally, the days of the Paramoun Fast were fasted continually. However, the frail are given special exemptions. For all these we can define a general rule, that the period of abstention should be left to the advice of the father confessor, to prevent some from exaggeration causing them to either suffer physically, or to fall into thoughts of vainglory, and to prevent others from being lax and losing the benefits of fasting.

Regarding Church regulations, we would like to ask a question: Is there a relationship between the period of abstention and the Ninth Hour Prayer of the Agpeya? There appears to be because in the prayer of the Ninth Hour we notice that the Church has chosen the reading of the blessing of food after a period of fasting (Lk.9:10-17). It is clear that in the Ninth Hour Prayer we remember Christ's death on the Cross, so why then has this hour this particular Gospel reading concerning blessing of food? It appears that the rites for the period of abstention was generally until the ninth hour, so people would pray this hour with its Gospel reading, and then break their fast. Because the majority of the year was fasting, and in order to keep the same rites of prayers during fasting and non-fasting periods this Gospel reading remained the same to remind us of God's blessing of food before eating. Anyway, there is no need to expound the period of abstention, so long as it changes with the person's

circumstances and condition, and we leave it to the advice of the father confessor.

What matters to us is the spiritual condition of the period of abstention. We do not want to enter into formalities or special rules about the period of abstention, but we want to speak about the way in which a person can benefit spiritually during this period, as it is possible for a person to abstain from food till 3 o'clock or till the evening or later, yet not benefit spiritually due to not fasting in a spiritual way.

What, then, is the Spiritual Way?

Firstly, the period of abstention should be a period of asceticism and piety in which you do not give any concern to the things pertaining to the body. This means that whilst you are abstaining from food you do not continually think about when you will eat or what you will eat, nor find pleasure in the preparation of food. The period of abstention should be one in which you rise above the level of food and matter and eating.

Secondly, after the period of abstention, do not eat with appetite. He who abstains from food and then eats what he craves for or chooses the kinds of foods he enjoys has not subdued his body nor mortified its desires. Eating lustily or what one craves for proves that the person has not benefitted spiritually from the period of abstention and has not learnt from it asceticism; take note of what Daniel the Prophet said about his fasting, "*I ate no pleasant food*" (Dan.10:3).

Thirdly, do not seek the period of abstention to end so that you can eat. If the time to eat arrives do not rush to eat. It is preferable if you hold out, even for a few moments, or say to yourself, "Let me pray for a while and then eat". Do not rush into eating, but let the asceticism

which you possessed during the period of abstention continue with you after it, as this is the spiritual benefit you gain.

Be led by your spiritualities and not by the clock. Enter into the depths of abstention from food, which is rising above the level of food, and the level of the material and the level of the flesh. In the period of abstention, it is more beneficial to you if you reach the point at which you feel the sensation of hunger.

The Element of Hunger

Many people abstain from food, yet eat whilst not feeling the need for food, without reaching the point of feeling hungry, without forbearing hunger, enduring it and taking its spiritual benefits. The Holy Bible presents us with examples of hunger in fasting:

In His forty day fast, Christ the Lord, glory be to Him, *“was hungry”* (Matt.4:2), and according to our teacher the Evangelist Saint Luke’s account, *“He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry”* (Lk.4:2). It is also mentioned that Christ the Lord was hungry on Monday of the Holy Passion Week (Mk.11:12).

Some may say that the level of Christ the Lord is difficult for us, so let us talk about the fasting of human beings which had the element of hunger. It was said of Saint Peter the Apostle that he *“became very hungry and wanted to eat”* (Acts 10:9). In talking about his and his co-workers’ ministry, Saint Paul the Apostle said, *“in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-”* (2Cor.11:27), and, *“I have learned both to be full and to be hungry”* (Phil.4:12). God blessed the condition of hunger when He said, *“Blessed are you who hunger now, for you*

shall be filled” (Lk.6:21). If the hunger of Lazarus the poor qualified him to be in the bosom of our father Abraham for having fulfilled his sufferings on earth, even if unwillingly, how much more will he who hungers willingly here on earth in asceticism, receive good things in eternity and nearness to God?

The Lord trained His people on hunger in the wilderness and said to them, *“And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord”* (Deut.8:2-3). He who seeks to evade the phrase *“humbled you”* and the phrase *“allowed you to hunger”*, will not be able to encounter the phrase *“fed you with manna”*. The people of Israel rebelled against this training of hunger and so perished in the wilderness.

Fasting reaches its perfection in the reaching of the sensation of hunger and enduring this sensation. If you do not reach the sensation of hunger, you would not yet have reached the depth of fasting. If you prolong the period of abstention until you reach the point of feeling hungry and then eat immediately, you would not have experienced nor endured hunger and hence would not have received the spiritual benefits of hunger.

The Spiritual Benefits Inherent in Hunger

The person who experiences hunger becomes conscious of his weakness and so becomes remote from self-conceit. In his weakness, his physical poverty leads him to poverty of spirit. Through the humbling of the body

comes the humbling of the soul, which then, feeling the need for a power to support her, resorts to God through prayer, saying to Him, "O Lord, support my weakness with Your Divine power, for of myself I can do nothing".

The prayer of a hungry person is intense. Prayers proceeding from a body full of food are not full of the Spirit, that is why prayer is always united with fasting, and fasting with prayer. When people wish to attain to intense prayer, they fast. Therefore, during Holy Week, people's prayers have depth. A Paschal hymn recorded during Holy Week has depth, being recorded whilst the chanter is fasting, whereas the same hymn recorded on an ordinary day may lose its spirituality and turn into merely a piece of music.

God likes man to sense his weakness, that his heart may become contrite. Hunger helps man to reach this. That is why metanoias are suitable during fasting periods but not when the stomach is full. My advice to you is that, if you feel hungry, do not eat but hold out and take the blessing of hunger. Christ the Lord fasted forty days and afterward was hungry. When Satan advised Him to eat, He refused to eat in spite of His hunger, thus giving us a lesson. Therefore, endure hunger. If you feel hungry, do not escape the sensation by busying yourself with chatter or amusements or sleep so that the period of hunger passes by you unfelt. By fleeing from hunger, you flee from its blessings and its spiritual benefits, and you escape from training yourself on the virtue of endurance and mortifying the flesh.

We want to benefit from the sensation of hunger, not escape from it. If hunger presses on you, say to yourself, "I do not deserve to eat because of my many sins". In this way your soul will be humbled within you at the same time as it is crushed by the fatigue of the body.

Thus pride, self-elation and self-conceit will leave you, and if you pray, your prayer will be with humility. But he who stands to pray when he feels very strong, how can he feel contrition? Two minutes that you pray when hungry are better than hours when you are full. In fact, the hungry person longs to pray, but more often than not, he who feels full forgets to pray. That is why there are many religious people who pray before eating, but few who pray afterwards, save on official occasions.

Training on Hunger in Fasting

Hunger should be practised with discernment. Indeed, those who realise the benefits gained through hunger, prolong it. I do not mean to the extent of exaggeration so that the person feels too faint to stand in prayer, preferring to kneel down not out of reverence, but in order to seek rest and relaxation for his very fatigued body. But this training should be practised with discernment, within the limit of the person's physical endurance. Nonetheless, I tell you in all honesty: Do not fear the sensation of hunger for it will not continue. If you give the stomach more than it needs, it enlarges to absorb the excess, but if you do not give it enough to be full, it will feel hunger. If you hold out through the sensation of hunger and not give the stomach its full, it will start to accommodate itself and shrink, and with persistence in this training, it will no longer be too large and will no longer feel hungry and the little will make it feel satisfied and full.

Sage is he who controls himself and keeps the system of his stomach, eating neither too much nor exaggerating in abstaining, causing his stomach to shrink below the needs of his body. Moderation in this respect is beneficial and full of wisdom.

Fasting and Vigils

Satiety leads to heaviness of the body and consequently, to sleepiness. But fasting leads to lightness of the body, which, not being weighed down by digestion, is able to keep vigil. Fasting and vigil provide enlightenment to the intellect. All the saints who perfected fasting were also known for keeping vigils. We notice that after the two suppers, the disciples' eyes were heavy with sleep when they were in the garden and they could not stay awake with the Lord, not even for one hour (Matt.26:40). And you, my brother, it is not in your favour for the Bridegroom to come in the middle of the night and find you sleeping, when the Holy Bible says, "*Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching*" (Lk.12:37) . Therefore train yourself on fasting, for fasting is linked with keeping vigils. By keeping vigil, we mean staying awake in the company of God and spending the night in prayer.

The Type of Food

It is important to remind you here of Daniel's words about his fast, "*I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled*" (Dan.10:3). Therefore, if when you fast, you give your body what it desires, you would not be truly fasting. Hence refrain from delicious foods so that you subdue your body and subject it to your will. Do not seek a particular kind of food, nor ask for it to be cooked in a way you like. If a food you enjoy in particular is placed before you, do not eat much of it. I do not want to say to you as one of the saintly fathers said, "If a certain food which you relish is placed before you, spoil it a little and then eat it"; by spoiling it he means, for example, adding something to it to alter its taste. At least do not eat all that is given to you, and as one of the fathers said, "Take your hand away from it while you still desire it", that is, control yourself and refrain from eating it while your body wishes to continue and finish it.

Vegan Food

Vegan food is a Divine arrangement; it was the original food of our father Adam and mother Eve; they were vegans as were their descendants till Noah. God created man vegan; Adam and Eve did not eat of the Garden save vegetation- seeds and fruits. God had said to them, *“See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food”* (Gen.1:29). Even the animals were vegans till that time, for the Lord said, *“Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food”; and it was so*” (Gen.1:30).

After man’s expulsion from the Garden, he continued to be vegan. Yet, besides seeds and fruit, he was permitted to eat of the herbs of the fields, that is, vegetables, when the Lord said to him, *“Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field”* (Gen.3:18). We never learnt that either our father Adam or mother Eve fell ill due to malnutrition, but on the contrary, learn that our father Adam lived 930 years (Gen.5:5). In like manner were the lifespans of his children and grandchildren- vegan generations.

Man was not permitted to eat meat till after Noah’s ark- in a dark period in which his evil had propagated the earth so much so, that God saw *“that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart”* (Gen.6:5,6). Hence, after the Flood, God spoke to our father Noah and his sons, saying, *“Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. But*

you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Gen.9:3,4).

When God led His people in the wilderness, He fed them with vegan food; with manna which was *“like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey”* (Ex.16:31). The people *“gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil”* (Num.11:8). When God permitted them to eat meat, He did so in wrath- permitting it out of their craving and murmuring against the manna, pleading for meat with tears. The Lord gave them what they craved for, but struck them severely, for *“while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was aroused against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague. So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving”* (Num.11:33,34).

Vegan food was also the food of Daniel the prophet and his friends who had *“vegetables to eat”* (Dan.1:12), purposing in their hearts not to defile themselves with the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank (Dan.1:8). We find Daniel saying about his fasting, *“I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled”* (Dan.10:3).

Vegan food was also the food of Ezekiel the prophet in his fast, which he observed following a Divine commandment, for God had said to him, *“Also take for yourself wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt; put them into one vessel, and make bread of them for yourself. During the number of days that you lie on your*

side, three hundred and ninety days, you shall eat it” (Ez.4:9).

Vegetarian food is light; free from the heaviness of meat with its fat. In animals we notice that the ferocious ones are meat-eaters, whilst the tame eat vegetation. It is well-known that vegetarians are more tranquil than meat eaters. Surprisingly, most of the animals we eat- calves, sheep, goats and chickens- are vegetation eaters. These animals are not frail from eating vegan foods. On the contrary, we often describe the health of a strong person as being ‘as fit as a camel’ or ‘as strong as a horse’, both of which are vegan.

The lifespan of vegans, among whom were the anchorites and hermits, were lengthy. Saint Abba Paul the First Hermit lived eighty years in which he saw no one, meaning that he lived for one hundred years. Most of the hermits lived long lives. They were not only vegans but also practised asceticism in food; their food was scanty, yet they were very healthy. Abba Anthony the father of all monks lived for 105 years. He lived a life of continuous fasting, was healthy, and could walk for tens of miles without feeling tired.

Fasting makes the body light and active. The bodies of our fathers who practised fasting, were light, their spirits were free, their movements were active and their hearts were strong. They were able to daily walk tens of kilometres without feeling weary, moving in the wilderness like gazelles, their minds not weighed down but very sharp. Fasting gave them active bodies, minds and spirits. They found their rest and pleasure in fasting. Thus their whole life became fasting.

Let no one say that fasting and vegan food weakens health, for it actually strengthens health. Fasting is not

merely a treatment for the spirit but it is moreover a healing for the body. We never heard that vegan foods weakened anyone. Daniel and the three saintly youths did not eat meat from the king's table but were sufficed with the seeds, and their health was better than the others (Dan.1:15). Do not worry, then, about your physical health.

What tires the body is not fasting but eating. Too much eating, overstuffing of the stomach, loss of control, and eating between meals cause the body to suffer. Therefore do not be under the impression that fasting makes the body suffer. Most probably this idea sprang from the excessive maternal compassion of mothers on their children's health, when they would rejoice on seeing their children fat, thinking that that was good health, when an overweight person might be weaker than someone thinner. The erroneous compassion of these mothers forbade their children from fasting, making them afraid to practise it. We call this compassion erroneous, for it is not concerned with the child's spiritual health as much as their physical health, as though the mothers were mothers for only the bodies of their children. Although such a mother does care for her child's physical nutrition, yet she neglects his spiritual nutrition.

Nonetheless we hear of saintly children who used to fast, such as Saint Mark the recluse of Mount Anthony who began fasting during his early childhood, fasting continuing with him as a mode of life. Likewise was Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite who, in his childhood, used to give his food to the shepherds whilst he remained in fasting and prayer till sunset, when he was just nine years old.

Fasting for young and old alike is a source of health and strength. It aids the body to be rid of excess water

and fat, thus keeping for us the bodies of the saints undecayed, due to the blessing with which God endowed these bodies as a reward for their sanctity. This is on one side. And on the other, these bodies became freed from the cause of rottenness due to the scarcity of moisture and fat in them. You may be able to preserve meat for a long time from rottenness if you expose it to heat to expel from it all the water and fat; its dryness helps its preservation to an extent. Such were the bodies of the saints through fasting- no fat or excess water, and so decay did not find its way to them. But why should we concentrate on the body? Is fasting a virtue for the body only?

Fasting is Not Merely a Virtue of the Body

Fasting is not merely a virtue of the body apart from the spirit, for any work in which the spirit does not share is not considered a virtue at all. What is the work of the body in fasting? And what is the work of the spirit?

True fasting is primarily a spiritual work within the heart. The work of the body in fasting is to prepare for the work of the spirit, or it is an expression of the feelings of the spirit. The spirit rises above the level of matter and food, and above the level of the body, and so it leads the body in its victory and in its spiritual desires. The body expresses this action by fasting.

If we limit our interpretation of fasting to being the humbling of the body through hunger and abstaining from what it desires, we would be taking the negative from fasting and leaving its positive spiritual work. Fasting is not starving the body but it is nourishing the spirit. Fasting is not to afflict the body, or a martyrdom or a cross for the body as some may think, but it is the transcendence of the body to reach the level of co-operation with the spirit. In fasting, we do not mean to

make the body suffer, but we mean not to walk according to the flesh, so that the person fasting becomes spiritual and not carnal.

Fasting is an ascetic spirit making the body co-work with her in asceticism. Fasting is not a hungry body but rather it is a transcendent and pure body. It is not the state of a hungry body which longs to eat, but a body which has rid itself of the lust for food, and in its sight, food loses its value.

Fasting is a period in which the spirit transcends, pulling the body up with her, freeing it from its burdens and weights, attracting it upwards with her so as to co-work with her the work of the Lord without any hindrance. The spiritual body enjoys this.

Fasting is a spiritual period in which the body and the spirit spend together in a spiritual work, in which the body co-works with the spirit in the same work which is the work of the spirit; the body co-works with the spirit in prayer, in contemplation, in praise and communion with God.

We pray, not only with a fasting body, but also with a fasting soul, with a fasting mind, with a heart fasting from lusts and pleasures, and with a spirit fasting from the love of the world, in mortification to the world but full of life with God, being nurtured on Him and on His love. In this way, fasting is a good means for spiritual work; it is a spiritual atmosphere in which the whole of man- heart, soul, mind, senses and emotions- lives.

Fasting is an expression of the body's asceticism in matter and materialism and its yearning to live with God. This asceticism is an indication that the body is co-working with the spirit, sharing in her spiritual qualities,

the body becoming spiritual in its ways taking on the image of the spirit. In fasting the person does not concern himself with the things pertaining of the body which are of no concern to the spirit, nor of the body in its spiritual state.

Do not Concern Yourselves with the Things of the Body

In the Lord's discourse on spiritual nutrition, we hear Him saying, "*Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life*" (Jn.6:27). Then He speaks about the Bread that comes down from heaven, the true Bread, the Bread of God, the Bread of Life (Jn.6:32-35). Here He directs the attention to the spirit and its food, directing our thoughts spiritually so that we may not be preoccupied with the body and its food. In mentioning the phrase, "*Man shall not live by bread alone*" (Matt.4:4), His desire was that man not live according to the flesh, depending on bread as his food, and forgetting the spirit and her food. Concerning this food of the spirit, He said to His disciples, "*I have food to eat of which you do not know*" (Jn.4:32).

Here the following question crosses our minds: Was Christ on the Mount fasting or eating? The answer is that, He was fasting and He was also eating. He was fasting as far as the body was concerned, and He was eating as far as the spirit was concerned. He had another food of which people knew not, with which the spirit was able to carry the fasting body throughout the forty days, during which the Lord was not concerned with the food of the body, or left the body to feed on the food of the spirit.

He gives us a lesson in caring for the things of the spirit and not only the things of the body. In this domain we set before our eyes the words of the Divine Inspiration spoken through the mouth of our teacher Saint Paul in which he explains the subject of caring about the things of

the flesh and the things of the Spirit. He says, *“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit”* (Rom.8:1). This is how we would like to walk during fasting and throughout our entire life.

The Apostle continues his explanation, saying, *“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit”* (Rom.8:5). Do you care for the things of the Spirit, or do you care for the things of the flesh? Do you care for your spiritual growth or for the pleasure of your flesh? Do you care for your spiritual health or are all your concerns for your physical health?

However, the danger in caring for the flesh lies in the difficult to bear phrases, *“For to be carnally minded is death”* (Rom.8:6), and, *“the carnal mind is enmity against God”* (Rom.8:7). Who can bear to hear these words yet remain walking according to the flesh? Here the Apostle also says that *“those who are in the flesh cannot please God”* (Rom.8:8), and, *“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors — not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live”* (Rom.8:12-13).

These words of the Apostle are good, for in fasting we are not mortifying the body itself, but the deeds of the body. We mortify them that we may live. We are not torturing the body but we are not walking according to the flesh. We are not giving the flesh its lusts and pleasures, but rather we are giving the body transcendence, elevation above the material and submission to the Spirit, for the Apostle says, *“to be spiritually minded is life and peace”* (Rom.8:6).

This is fasting. Therefore, before the Apostle's words, we ask: Are you, in your fasting, concerning yourself with the things of the Spirit? This is what we would like to speak of in the following chapters, that our fasting may be spiritual and acceptable before God. If fasting is not merely the hunger of the body but rather the feeding of the spirit, then let us then seek the spiritual food. What are they and are you receiving them during your fasting?



*“Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the LORD your God; and cry to the LORD”
(Joel 1:14)*

Sanctify a Fast

The Lord spoke through the mouth of Joel the prophet, saying, “*Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly*” (Joel 1:14). What is the meaning of sanctifying a fast? How can it be practised?

The Meaning of ‘Sanctify a Fast’

To “*sanctify*” means to “set apart”. When the Lord said to Moses, “*Sanctify to Me all the firstborn; whatever is first... is Mine*” (Ex.13:2), He meant, “Set apart for Me the firstborn that they may be for no other purpose”. The firstborn of men were consecrated to minister to the Lord, and the firstborn of beasts were to be offered as sacrifices.

Holy vestments were vestments sanctified or consecrated to the Lord for the ministry of the priests. Regarding this, the Lord said to Moses the prophet, to “*make Aaron’s garments, to consecrate him, that he may minister to Me as priest*” (Ex.28:3). The altar utensils are utensils sanctified to the Lord, that is, set apart for ministering unto Him, and are not permitted to be used for any other purpose.

Sanctifying or consecrating the house of the Lord means setting apart the house for the Lord; it is not to be used for any other purpose save worshipping the Lord; “*My house shall be called a house of prayer*” (Matt.21:13). The question might arise: What is the meaning of the Lord’s words regarding His disciples, “*And for their sakes I sanctify Myself*” (Jn.17:19)? They

mean: “I set Myself apart for their sakes, that is, for the Church’s sake, for I have come to ransom them”.

Therefore, sanctified things are things that are set apart for the Lord; they are things that are for the Lord alone and none other. The sanctification of days carry the same meaning, that is, they should be set apart for the Lord. The phrase, “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy*” (Ex.20:8) means set this day apart, on it no work should be done; it is the Lord’s. The same meaning applies to all the Lord’s convocations and feasts, they should be set apart for the Lord; in them no work should be done (Lev.23:3,7,8,21,25,31,36).

Therefore, sanctifying a fast means setting the fast apart for God. The days of the fast are for the Lord; the world has no portion in them- they are the Lord’s portion. They are sanctified to Him. That was why the Divine Inspiration clarified this meaning by saying, “*Sanctify a fast, call a sacred assembly*” because a sacred assembly suits sanctifying a fast, that is, by setting the fast apart for Him.

Yet, what can you do if you are unable to set apart the whole time for the Lord, and if you cannot spend time in sacred solitude because of your busy work schedule? Set apart what time you can to spend it with the Lord, and if you cannot do anything about the shortness of your time, then there is another way for setting apart: at least, sanctify the aim of the fast for the Lord. In this way it will be a sanctified fast, that is, a fast set apart for the Lord in its aim and in its means.

What is the Aim of Your Fasting?

Why do we fast? What is our aim in fasting? According to the aim will the means be defined, and also according to the aim will the result be. Do we fast merely because this is the rite, or just because the fast has commenced according to the calendar, or because the Church has announced it? If this is the case, then the interior element of the heart is missing. Of course, obeying the Church is important, and obeying the commandment, necessary, but when we obey the commandment, we ought to obey it spiritually and not superficially. If the Church has arranged this fast for us, she has done so for the sake of its spiritual depth. So what is the spiritual depth, and what is our aim in fasting?

Is our aim merely to deprive and humiliate the body? Actually, depriving the body is not a virtue in itself but merely a means to a virtue; for the spirit to enter into her realm. So should we then, stop short at the means, or enter into the aim which is giving the spirit her realm? Numerous wrong aims stand in man's way in fasting. A person may fast to feel self-righteous in practising one of the spiritual means. Another may fast to gain people's praise for his level of fasting, thus falling into vainglory, that is, into sin.

What is the Sound Aim of Fasting?

The sound aim is that we fast for the sake of our love for God. Because of our love for God, we want our spirits to cleave to Him, and we do not want our bodies to stand as obstacles in the spirit's way. That is why, through fasting, we subject our body to co-work with our spirit. We want to rise above the level of the material and of the flesh, that we may live in the Spirit

and that our human spirits may have an opportunity to co-work with the Spirit of God and enjoy God's communion and love.

Indeed, enjoying God's love and the sweetness of His communion should be the mode of the whole of life. However, we must not forget that we attain to it more intensely during fasting when there is a greater deepening and a greater circumspection, as training and a preparatory step for this enjoyment to become the way of the whole of life.

We fast because fasting draws us nearer to God. Fasting involves solemn solitude, and solemn solitude is an opportunity for prayer, spiritual reading and contemplation. Fasting assists in keeping vigils and in practising metanoias. Vigils and metanoias are a realm for prayer. Prayer involves the control of the will and victory over desires. This helps in repentance which is the way to God and to reconciliation with Him. We fast, and in our fasting feed on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt.4).

Therefore, we fast for the sake of God's love and for the sake of communion with Him. We fast because fasting assists us in asceticism in life, in worldly matters and in mortification to the material, and these strengthen us in our preparation for eternal life and in our abidance in God.

Therefore, if fasting is days set apart for God alone and if we fast for the sake of God and His love, then the question arises: Are there fasts that are not sanctified to God? Yes, there are some fasts in which God has no portion, such as someone who fasts but

God has no portion in his life despite his fasting. He fasts, yet remains the same as he was with all his faults; nothing changes in him. Or a person might fast out of habit or for fear of embarrassment for the sake of his reputation as a servant, or his fasting might be carnal, associated with the body, the spirit having no share in it. Or it might be a fast to show off his ability to abstain from food, or it might be a fast from food whilst at the same time enjoying other pleasures which he cannot abstain from.

Some may think that fasting is merely a relationship between man and food, God not being a Third Party. All his concern in fasting is, "How long is the period of abstention? When can he eat? How can he advance in prolonging the period of abstention? What should he eat? How can he withhold himself from eating certain foods? How can he fast consecutive days?" This is as though fasting were between only two parties: him and food, or him and the body, God not being Party to this fast in any shape or form. Is this fasting?

Fasting is not just dealing with the body, but it is dealing with God. Fasting which is void of God is not fasting at all. For the sake of God, we eat, and for His sake, we fast. For the sake of God we eat that this body obtains the strength to be able to serve God, and to be faithful in its responsibilities towards others. For the sake of God, we suffer hunger, in order to subject the body so as not to sin against God, but to keep the body under our control and not the other way round; so that the desires and lusts of the flesh should not lead us in our behaviour, but that we should walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh, for the sake of

our love for God and the keeping of our fellowship with His Holy Spirit. In all other cases, fasting will be rejected by God.

Futile and Rejected Fasting

Not every fast is acceptable to God, as there are futile fasts which cannot be considered fasting and are rejected by God. The Holy Bible presents us with some examples of these rejected fastings:

+ Fasting for Gaining People's Praise

Of the fasting which a person desires to be disclosed and seen by others in order to be praised by them, the Lord said in His Sermon on the Mount, *"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly"* (Matt.6:16-18). This fasting which is practised for people's praise is not for God; God has no portion in it- that is why it is futile.

+ Fasting for Boasting

The fasting of the boastful Pharisee is another example. He stood before God to boast of his virtues saying, *"God, I thank You that I am not like other men— extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess"* (Lk.18:9-14), at the same time condemning the tax-collector, saying, *"or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess"* (Lk.18:9). This parable shows us that fasting that is not

mingled with humility and contrition is rejected by God, for it involves self-righteousness and arrogance (Lk.18:9).

+ *Fasting For a Sinful Cause*

An example of this is the fasting of the Jews who agreed among themselves, *“saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy”* (Acts 23:12-13). Of course this fasting was a sin and we cannot call it fasting in the spiritual sense.

+ *The Fast of the Sinful at Prophet Jeremiah’s Time*

God did not accept their fast but said of them to Jeremiah, *“Do not pray for this people, for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence”* (Jer.14:11,12). God rejected their fasting, prayers and sacrifices because they were living an evil life and their hearts were not pure before Him.

Therefore, fasting which is not combined with repentance is not an acceptable fast, for God desires a pure heart more than a hungry body. The person whose mouth fasts from food, yet whose heart does not fast from sin nor his tongue from falsehood, his fasting is futile- even if he were to give his body to be burnt, it would profit him nothing (1Cor.13:3).

+ *Fasting that is Far From Mercy and Charity*

God explained this matter to Prophet Isaiah when He said to him, *“ ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and*

You take no notice?’ ...Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness... Would you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Is.58:3-7).

He who fasts, even though he humbles himself, putting on sackcloth and ashes and bowing down his head like a bulrush, will not be offering an acceptable fast until it is mingled with deeds of mercy, with charitable deeds, and with purity of heart.

+ Fasting not for God

One person may fast because the doctors ordered him to, another may fast in order to improve his appearance and physique, both of which are not for God, and are not spiritually beneficial. A third may fast as a strike against food and not for a spiritual aim, nor for God. A fourth may refrain from eating due to depression or sorrow. We cannot consider any of these as true fasting. We repeat that every fasting that is not for God, nor for a spiritual reason, can not be considered as fasting at all, being not accepted by God.

What, then, is the spiritual fasting acceptable to God? It is the fasting in which you establish a deep relationship with God, and feel His presence in your life, and your relationship with Him increases and matures daily in spiritual enjoyment, so that you desire

that your fast is prolonged and does not come to an end.

What is God's Relation to Your Fast?

What did God receive from your fast, and what did you receive from God? What did you give God in your fast and what did He give you? Was your fasting an extraordinary period in your life? Were they consecrated days in which you experienced a spiritual awakening calling you to taste and see how good the Lord is? Did you experience how to walk in the Spirit and not according to the flesh in it?

There are three things which you need to devote to God in your fast if you want your fast to be sanctified to Him. Through fasting, you devote your heart, your mind and your will to God. Your fasting should be an exercise in strengthening your will. Your will should be exercised not only with items of food, but your will which succeeded in controlling food can offer itself to God in everything, so that you will nothing but what God wills. This is the underlying wisdom of fasting: that the abstaining of the self from food extends to a general abstinence in all that is displeasing to God.

It is not enough that you control yourself from eating foods that contain animal products or from food in general with certain sins remaining outside your control, but in your fast, submit your will to God and say to Him, "Not my will, but Your will, be done". Therefore, search out where does your will wander away from God? Focus on this point in particular, so that you may overcome it and offer to God a good will pleasing to Him.

Strive that your fasting changes something in you. Take from fasting not merely a changing of food, but a changing of life to the better, a changing in your delinquencies, the weaknesses which you perceive in your relationship with God and with people. For what benefit is it to you to vanquish your body for the fifty-five days of Great Lent, then to come out exactly as you were before, without having had a relationship of love with God or an abiding communion in Him?

Consider how many fasts you have practised after which you are still the same! How many fasts have you practised since you have known God until now? How many years have passed by, in each a number of fasts as well as the Wednesday and Friday fasts? Consider whether in each fast your will prevailed even if in a certain weak point, allowing you to reconcile with God in that point and taste the sweetness of His will? I wonder, if you walked in such a way, what a prolific spiritual increase in your life you would have seen and how much your relationship with God would increase and deepen!

The Church has regulated fasting for our spiritual well-being, for the sake of energising our spirits, reminding us of the exemplary life in which we ought to walk, by training us on the *“holiness without which no one will see God”* (Heb.12:14). Therefore, fasting is an exceptionally holy and exemplary period. It needs spiritual measures in line with its holiness. No sooner does the fasting start than we feel that we have entered into a sublime life and extraordinary days in which we become trained in the life of perfection. That is why these days ought not to pass us by like any other days;

they are a new page in our relationship with God which we enter into with new feelings and a new spirit.

Have you heard of the fast that casts out demons; how God said that, *"this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting"* (Matt.17:21)? What sort of fasting is this that demons cannot endure and are expelled? Is it mere abstinence from food? No, undoubtedly not. It is the strong relationship which binds the person who is fasting with God. Satan cannot endure the intimacy between man and God, the intimacy of love and the spiritual communion of which he has been deprived. No sooner does he behold it than he feels disturbed and leaves. Satan sees a heart clinging to God in fasting and flees.

Does your heart cling to God in fasting? Do you give Him your heart as much as you give Him your will? Do you feel His love at the time of your fast? Do you, out of your love for God, forget your food and drink and no longer give them any attention, as though you were saying to your body, "I have no time for you now—whether to eat or not to eat, this does not occupy my mind nor is it my priority, *'to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose'* (Ecc.3:1). Now is not your time. Now I am occupied with spiritual work with God. So come and join us if you wish to share in this fast. As for food, now is not the proper time for it; now my food is every word that proceeds from the mouth of God". Such are the feelings of he who, in his fast, says with Saint John the Visionary, *"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day"* (Rev.1:10). Undoubtedly, the day of fasting is the Lord's day. So are you in the Spirit in your fast? Do you forget your flesh completely with all its desires, needs and demands, preferring to live in the

Spirit during this time of fasting, in which the body takes nothing of you save the unavoidable necessities, as though you join Saint Paul in saying, *“whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows”* (2Cor.12:3)?

Will your mind be occupied with God during fasting? During the Holy Liturgy the priest cries out, saying, “Where are your minds?”, and the congregation responds, “They are with the Lord”. I wish to ask the same question regarding fasting, “Where are your minds?” Can you reply, saying, “They are with the Lord”? Is not the fasting period set apart for God, consecrated for Him, in which your mind should only be occupied with Him? Examine yourself, my brother, and search the whereabouts of your thoughts during fasting.

Do the things of the world occupy your mind during fasting? You are in the vortex of work, in the vortex of the news, in the vortex of talking with people, having no time to give your thoughts to God. You may fast until sunset while your thoughts are not with God, exhausted from wondering on the earth. You may think on trivial matters and talk of trifle things, and God is not in your thoughts. You do not remember Him save when you sit down to eat, when you pray before eating and remember God and remember that you are fasting! Is this a spiritual fast that comforts your conscience? Were you to remember the words of the Prophet David, *“I have set the Lord always before me”* (Ps.16:8). He is before me in every work I do, in every word I say. He is a witness to everything. I have placed Him before me because He is my goal from which I do not want to deviate, even for a second. I have placed Him before me

because it is for Him alone that I fast. I fast that He may ever be in my mind.

If on normal days you ought to place the Lord before you at all times, how much more ought you to do so in times of fasting which are set apart and consecrated for Him? If God is not in your mind, you are not fasting. The days of fasting in which you do not think of God, do not count them in your fasting days; they can never be included among the heading, 'Sanctify a Fast'. Yet some may ask, "How can I do this when I live in the world and have many responsibilities that I need to think about?" Then keep the balance and there are three rules:

- 1) Do not let your responsibilities dominate your life, leaving you no room in your mind for God. Set limits to your responsibilities and make room for your Lord.
- 2) Shun every thought that is displeasing to God, which does not agree with the holy atmosphere in which you live, "*bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ*" (2Cor.10:5). Therefore do not defile your fast with bad thoughts. Keep the thought that is obedient to Christ, and expel the thought that is not.
- 3) Share your thoughts with God and at the conclusion of your thinking, say, "I think of this matter for the sake of God".

You think of your responsibilities, you do well, but do not let them be separate from God. God is the One who gave you these responsibilities and you think of

them for His sake. Do not let your thinking about them be distant from God. For the sake of God you think of your business affairs. For the sake of God you think of your studies, and for His sake you think of your ministry and family responsibilities, on condition that this thinking does not take you away from God who is the aim.

Think of your responsibilities but at the same time say to God, "Co-work with Your servant". A student, for example, studying as he fasts, and God co-works with him. He studies and God gives him understanding and confirms the information in his mind and memory. The student says to the Lord, "Lord, I cannot understand by myself; You stay by my side and give me understanding. I thank You for being with me. Lord, I do not study for the sake of knowledge nor for the sake of the future but for You, that everyone may know that Your children are successful and that they are faithful in any work they do; that God is with them and supports them. And so people will love You because of them".

Say to God, "For Your sake I eat that I may gain the strength to be able to stand in prayer, keep vigil in contemplations and serve Your children. I fast that my spirit may cling to You without any hindrance from my body". This is how you ought to be with God during fasting, in every work you do.

Enter into fellowship with Christ who fasted. Fast with Him as much as your feeble nature allows. He fasted for you, so you at least fast for yourself. He refused to eat the material bread, and you share with Him in refusing this mortal food. He fed on His love for

the Father and on His communion with Him, and you also do likewise. He prevailed over Satan during His fast, and you pray to Him to lead you in His victory.

Thus fasting will become a period of spiritual nourishment for you. What exhausts some is that their body does not receive nourishment and neither does their spirit, making this period one of deprivation and torture. This is not the spiritual meaning of fasting. Moreover, this deprivation gives a dim picture of fasting, limiting it to the negative, the deprivation of the body, but omitting the positive, the nourishment of the spirit.

The nourishment of the spirit is prayer, contemplation, reading the Holy Bible and all spiritual books such as the Patristic sayings, the life-stories of the saints, singing hymns and praises, attending spiritual meetings and discourses, doing metanoias, and such like. Spiritual nutrition also encompasses spiritual feelings, the love of God and everything associated with eternal life.

If the spirit is nurtured she can carry the body. This is what we see clearly during Passion Week where the level of asceticism is high and the period of abstention long, yet the body endures without feeling tired due to the nutrition received by the spirit during that week from the remembrance of Christ's Passion, the readings, the hymns, the rites of the Passover and the concentration of the intellect on our Lord and His Passion.

Often a person will read and feel satiated following the reading and the pleasure gained from it, and so when the time for eating arrives he does not feel the

desire to eat but his whole desire is to continue and finish reading. This is because the spirit has nurtured and carried the body so that it does not feel hunger. Therefore, give the spirit her nourishment during fasting and be confident that she will give strength to the body to endure fasting.

In like manner, the fasting of the body strengthens the work of the spirit, for the work becomes a spiritual work united with the asceticism of the body and the mind. That is why we find that prayer during fasting is more intense, and that the Holy Liturgies celebrated during fasting periods are more intense. They are prayers issuing from a fasting body which has left its reins with the spirit. They are prayers issuing from a heart fasting from the material, and from a spirit fasting from every worldly desire. That is why they are powerful prayers, such as the Midnight Prayer which is prayed whilst the person is fasting and his body is light.

In their fasting, our fathers concerned themselves with the work of the spirit. In their eating, they also concerned themselves with the work of the spirit. They would appoint one of their number to read the life-stories of the saints and the patristic oracles to them as they ate so there remained no space in their minds for food, but rather they took their spiritual food whilst they ate. Thus they grew accustomed to not being occupied with the work of the body, handing over its reins to the spirit.

Although there are commandments to fast, yet our fathers did not do so because of the commandment. They did not fast out of obedience to the commandment, but out of love for it. Obedience is the

level of beginners but love is the level of the mature and the perfect. For our fathers, fasting was not a statute nor a commandment neither was it a ritual, but it was a spiritual delight in which they found spiritual satisfaction; they found in it rest for their spirits and their bodies.

In fasting, our fathers did not stop at the limits of obeying the commandment but they entered into its spirituality. The spirituality of the commandment of fasting is for our benefit, otherwise God would not have commanded us to fast.

Great Lent

Great Lent comprises three fasts: the holy forty days preceded by a one week fast as a period of preparation or in lieu of the Saturdays (since there are no abstentions on Saturdays), followed by Passion Week. At the beginning of the Apostolic era, the Holy Pascha Week was not adjoined to Great Lent.

Great Lent is the holiest fast, its days the holiest of the year; we can name it “The Lord’s Fast”. If we divide the Church’s fasts into different levels, Great Lent is at the highest level; it is the spiritual nourishment for the whole year. It will be hard for the one who does not benefit spiritually from Great Lent, to benefit from other fasts with lesser levels of spirituality. It would be difficult for someone who spends the days of holy Lent leniently, to live meticulously the rest of the days of the year.

Try to benefit from this fast- from its hymns, readings, rituals, unique spirituality and Divine Liturgies which are celebrated late in the day. The early Church Fathers used to take Great Lent as a domain for preaching, during which people were in a spiritual state ready to receive the Word of God. Indeed, sermons are arranged over the whole year, but the sermons of Great Lent are of greater depth. That is why many of the books of John Chrysostom and Saint Augustine were homilies delivered during Great Lent. Rather, the Church used to assign the days of Great Lent for preparing the catechumens to accept the Faith and receive the grace of the Sacrament of Baptism. There were classes to teach them the rules of the Faith and

confirm them in the Faith, that they might receive Baptism on the Baptism Sunday and join the believers in the celebration of the Feast of Palm Sunday, in the Pascha prayers and the joy of the Resurrection. An example of this is the homilies of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem who used to prepare the catechumens, explaining to them the Creed during the Great Lent.

In her consideration for the Great Lent, the Church has defined for it special rituals. It has its own hymns, a longer period of abstention, particular Bible readings, particular responses, particular rites in the Morning Raising of Incense, and metanoias before the Ministers' absolution in which we say:

- + *Let us prostrate ourselves*
- + *Have mercy on us, O God the Pantocrator*
- + *Let us stand then prostrate ourselves again*
- + *Have mercy upon us, O God our Saviour*
- + *Let us stand and prostrate ourselves again*
- + *Have mercy upon us, and have mercy upon us*

That is why there is a separate Lectionary for the Great Lent. Also, sections of the Old Testament are read. Therefore, it has a particular spiritual atmosphere. The Church arranged for it to be preceded by a preparation week so that people may not directly commence fasting it without due preparation, but this week prepares them to commence this holy fast and at the same time to compensate for the Saturdays on which there are no abstentions.

The Church also prepares for Great Lent by preceding it by two weeks with the Fast of Nineveh, in which the same rituals and hymns apply, in order to

alert her congregation to the approaching of Great Lent, so that they may ready themselves for it through repentance, which is the essence of the Fast of Nineveh.

If Christ the Lord fasted this fast for us when He did not need to fast, how much more ought we to fast for ourselves when we are in dire need of fasting in order to accomplish all righteousness, following the pattern of Christ our Lord? Devoting much attention to it, the Church has named it 'Great Lent', for its greatness in length, being fifty-five days long, its greatness in holiness, as it is the Fast of the Lord, glory be to Him, and remembering His Holy Passion. For these reasons, sin committed during Great Lent is more hideous than at other times. Indeed, sin is sin, yet it is more hideous when committed during the days of Great Lent than in ordinary days, for he who commits an error during fasting and during Great Lent in particular is in fact committing a double sin: the repugnancy of the sin itself, in addition to making light of the holiness of the fasting days; they are two sins and not one.

Belittling the holiness of this fast is a sign of hardheartedness; the heart which is not affected by these holy days is undoubtedly a callous heart from the spiritual point of view. To him who sins during fasting, apply the words of Christ the Lord, *"If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"* (Matt.6:23). If these holy luminous days are a dim period, how much dimmer would normal days be!

The saintly monk fathers gave much attention to Great Lent. All their life was fasting, but Great Lent had its particular sanctity. They used to leave the monastery during the holy forty days of fasting and live

in solitude on the mountains. An example of this is found in the life-story of Saint Zosimus the priest and his encounter with the Penitent Saint Mary of Egypt. This same care was found in the monasticism of Saint Abba Shenouda the Archimandrite, and in many of the monasteries of Ethiopia.

May we also give our attention to these holy days. If we cannot fast consecutive days as did Christ the Lord, glory be to Him, then let us at least lead an ascetic attitude as far as is possible for us. If we cannot rebuke the Devil and prevail mightily over him as did the Lord Jesus Christ, then let us at least be prepared to resist him, remembering the reproach of Saint Paul the Apostle in his epistle to the Hebrews, when he said, "*You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin*" (Heb.12:4). Thence it is required of man to resist sin, even to the point of bloodshed.

If the three days fasted by Esther and her people had such a powerful effect, how much more then would fifty-five days fasted by a whole nation in supplication before God? Seriousness in fasting is needed, and spirituality in fasting is needed, and we should not take it routinely or carelessly.



*“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”
(Matthew 4:4)*

Virtues Twinned with Fasting

Those who fasted without deriving benefit must have fasted incorrectly; the fault lying not in fasting but in the manner of fasting. They must have either fasted in a carnal way, not paying attention to the virtues united with fasting, or have taken fasting as an aim in itself, when it is merely a means to an aim, which is to give the spirit a chance.

Fasting is a period of intense spirituality, a period of love for God and of clinging to Him. Out of this love, the person who fasts rises above the level of the carnal and all that is associated with it. Fasting is transcending the earthly to foretaste the heavenly. It is a period of sacred feelings for God, in the very least involving His presence and intimacy with Him. It is a period of spiritual struggle-with the self, with God, and against Satan.

Fasting days are days of spiritual energising and a time for storing up. From the depths of the spirituality gained, the person takes spiritual energy to support him in non-fasting days. In order for a person to fast spiritually, he should adhere to the following:

- (1) Fasting should be spiritual in its aim and motive, and not be practised out of obligation or in order to obtain praise, or out of habit, but for the sake of the love of God, in order to give the spirit a chance.
- (2) Fasting should be a period of repentance and purity of heart, in which a person is circumspect to lead a holy life acceptable to God, involving confession, self-censuring and partaking of the Holy Mysteries.

(3) Fasting should be a period of spiritual nourishment through a comprehensive spiritual programme in which the person pays attention to all the spiritual means, focusing not on the things of the body but on the things of the spirit, placing continually before his eyes not merely the type of food, but the holiness of the fasting days and what befits them, that his spirit may advance and strengthen. Fasting leads to strength of spirit, and strength of spirit helps a person to fast.

Fasting entails interlinked virtues. Due to the lightness of the body, fasting helps the person to keep vigil, and keeping vigil helps the person to read and pray. Spiritual reading also helps the person to pray, and the spiritual work altogether keep the spiritual person alert. Reading is a source of contemplation, and contemplation strengthens prayer, and vice versa. Fasting is associated with metanoias, and metanoias lead to humility and contrition of heart. Contrition of the body through fasting, leads to contrition of the spirit.

Fasting is united with the virtues related to the aim of the fast. There is a fast the aim of which is preparing a person for ministry, such as the Apostle's Fast, and a fast the aim of which is repentance, such as Nineveh's Fast, and a fast for the deliverance of a nation, such as Esther's Fast. There are fasts for the sake of others; an act of love, expending and sharing. All these fasts are linked to particular virtues. Would that we remember in our fasting that when Christ our Lord fasted for us, He was full of the Spirit. As for us, let us at least fast in order to be filled with the Spirit.

Fasting Twinned with Repentance

Fasts are holy days in which a person lives in holiness, in which the mind is sanctified, the heart is sanctified and the body also is sanctified. Fasting is a period in which you desire to be nearer to God, sin having alienated you from Him. Through repentance, therefore, you distance yourself from sin in order to be able to cleave to God.

In fasting, the body abstains from food and the spirit abstains from every earthly lust, every worldly desire and all the pleasures associated with the body. In this way, the person draws nearer to God through repentance. So ask yourself: Are you so? Without repentance, God will reject and not accept your fasting, which would forfeit you both heaven and earth, having afflicted yourself in vain. If you want God to accept your fasting, examine yourself with respect to all your sins and return from them. God has given you a lesson, a prototype, when He approached the Baptism of Repentance before His fasting.

Take an explicit example from the fasting of the people of Nineveh. The Holy Scriptures said that in their fast every one turned from his evil way and from the violence that was in his hands (Jon.3:8). For this reason, God did not want to destroy them, when He *“saw their works, that they turned from their evil way”* (Jon.3:10). The Holy Bible did not say that when God saw their sackcloth and their fasting, but when He saw their repentance, the essential element of their fasting.

In the Book of Joel the Prophet, we see an example of repentance accompanying fasting. Through the mouth of His prophet, the Lord said to His people, *“Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning... So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful”* (Joel 2:12,13). It is obvious here that fasting

ought to be united with repentance and weeping, being not merely abstaining from food, but rather the heart's inner feelings for God.

When Daniel fasted, he offered repentance on behalf of all the people. He fasted and made confession to God, saying, *"we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts... O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face... to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You"* (Dan.9:5-8).

Therefore, reconcile with God in your fasting. Do not say, *"How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?"* (Ps.13:1), but rather, *"How long, O Lord? Will I forget You forever? How long will I hide my face from You?"* Therefore, purify and sanctify yourself and get ready to meet these days. Ready yourself by indwelling God in your heart. If you are in sin, reconcile with God, and if you are reconciled with Him, deepen your love for Him.

If you abstained from sin during your fasting, continue to do so after the conclusion of the fast, for repentance should not be limited to the period of the fast but it befits fasting, the person training himself on it in order to attain to purity of heart, and then retaining this purity as his way of life.

In all these matters, prepare yourself for struggling against Satan, for as Joshua the son of Sirach says, "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation". When Satan sees your fasting and repentance, he envies your spiritual work, and so wages his war against you to make you forfeit the fruit of your work, through wiles to make you fall, saying to you,

“I will not let you complete all righteousness”. Remember then the words of Saint Peter the Apostle, “*Resist him, steadfast in the faith*” (1Pet.5:9). Hence, fasting is a period of spiritual combats, as that which took place with Christ the Lord, glory be to Him (Mt.4). It is also a period of victory for him who shares with Christ His fast.

Fasting Twinned With Prayer and Worship

Fasting without prayer is a mere physical act, losing its spiritual nature and spiritual benefit. Fasting is not only the body's abstinence from food on the negative side, but on the positive side, it is giving to the spirit her nourishment. Those whose fasts are void of any spiritual work- prayer, contemplation, spiritual reading, hymns or spiritual songs or metanoias- their fasts are a burden to them, reaping them no benefits. What is the difference between their fasts and the fasts of the Buddhists and Hindus? Where is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in their fasting?

Fasting is an opportunity for prayer, for one prayer when you are fasting is deeper than a hundred prayers when you are satiated and your voice can shake mountains! The Church always teaches us the union of prayer with fasting. In the Lenten Fraction of the Holy Liturgy during Great Lent, we repeat the phrase, “*fasting and prayer*”, and in talking about exorcism, the Lord Jesus Christ says, “*This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting*” (Mk.9:29), thus joining fasting with prayer.

The famous fasts in the Holy Bible were also united with prayer. In Nehemiah's fast, he says, “*So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said: 'I pray, Lord God of heaven,*

O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night' ” (Neh.1:4-6). He began to confess his sins and the sins of the people, pleading for God's mercy and intervention. The fast of Ezra was also united with prayer (Ez.8:21,23).

The Prophet Daniel's fast was united with prayer and wrestling with God, saying, *“O my God, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name”* (Dan.9:18-19).

In the fast of Nineveh, the people cried *“mightily to God”* (Jon.3:8). Therefore, in your fasting, cry to the Lord, lifting up contrite hearts to Him. Trust that God will respond to your fasting and cries, rebuking the winds and the currents, and the sea shall be still. Indeed, how deep are the prayers raised during holy days from contrite hearts cleansed through repentance! How much deeper are they when accompanied with holy Liturgies and Holy Communion.

Train yourself on the love of prayer and on wrestling with God. The most important thing is that in your prayer you give your heart and mind to God. Try not to comfort your conscience with the formalities of reciting some words without depth and not from the heart, so that you can say, “I fasted and prayed”, for this the Lord reproves,

saying, *"This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me"* (Mk.7:6). Prayer is a communication, so feel in your heart that you are in communion with God.

If sanctifying a fast means setting it apart for God, have you then set apart the period of your fast for God and for spiritual work? Is it a period of prayer, contemplation and spiritual reading, a period of spiritual storage and of giving your time exclusively to God, to be in communion with Him? Do your prayers increase more than on ordinary days? If you have not set apart most of your time for God, have you devoted your feelings and emotions to Him?

Fasting united with communion with God transforms into spiritual enjoyment, and in this delight the person endeavors to increase his fasting, food becoming a burden to him, for it takes him back to dealing with the body from which he was having a break during the period of abstention.

Fasting Twinned with Affliction and Weeping

Fasting is a period during which the spirit is in contrition before God, through repentance, tears, broken-heartedness and humility, so that the self may come to the realisation of its own weakness, that it is but dust and ashes, and so resort to the strength from on High. When the body is in contrition, so also is the spirit. In her contrition, the spirit is humbled and bows down before God in submission and lowliness, confessing her sins. This lowliness of heart draws God's compassion and the heart of all the inhabitants of heaven. In man's humility and feelings of inadequacy and weakness, he also feels

asceticism towards all things, his heart not being tied to any lust, and so speaks with God intensely.

The Holy Bible presents us numerous examples of affliction and humiliation in fasting, for God does not bear to see His children in humiliation before Him. In numerous examples in the Book of Judges, God sees the affliction of His people and descends to save them (Jud.3): *"In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them"* (Is.63:9). Through affliction and contrition of heart the people humbled themselves, and the Lord who is near to the humble and those of contrite heart, saved them.

The fast ordained by Joel the prophet is a clear example. He said, *"Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God... Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly"* (Joel 1:13,14). He also said, *" 'Now, therefore,' says the Lord, '...return to the Lord your God... sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly... let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar; let them say, 'Spare Your people, O Lord, and do not give Your heritage to reproach, that the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?' "* (Joel 2:12-17). Here we see a detailed picture of an all-complete fast; fasting united with repentance, prayer, affliction, weeping, mourning, solitude and sackcloth, as well as abstaining from the things of the body.

Another example is the fasting of the Ninevites in which not even the infants and sucklings tasted or ate anything. Not only that, but the people afflicted

themselves before God, laying in sackcloth and ashes. Even the king himself cast aside his royal robe, rose from his throne and sat in ashes and covered himself with sackcloth, and everyone cried vehemently to God (Jon.3).

In like manner were the fasts of Nehemiah and Ezra. Ezra the priest and scribe, said, *"Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones... So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer"* (Ezra 8:21-23). Similarly, Nehemiah also said of himself, *"I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying"* (Neh.1:4), and said of his people that they *"were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God"* (Neh.9:1-3). Is this not also a comprehensive fast, united with prayer, weeping, mourning, reading the Bible, repentance, confession, affliction in sackcloth and ashes?

Even so was the fasting of Daniel the Prophet. In one of his fasts, he said, *"Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the Lord my God, and made confession, and said, 'O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments, we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments' "* (Dan.9:3-5). And in another fast he said, *"In those days I, Daniel, was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint*

myself at all" (Dan.10:2,3). This fast consists of the same elements as the previous fasts.

Indeed, this is the type of fast of which David the Prophet spoke, saying, "*My clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting*" (Ps.35:13). Undoubtedly, mourning causes the cessation of all the lusts of the flesh and repels all desire for food, in addition to the fact that humility opens the gates of heaven.

Fasting Twinned with Solitude and Silence

In solemn solitude you keep silence, and finding no one to speak with, you speak with God. You do not spend your solitude with sin or with aimless thoughts, but you also withdraw in solitude in order for your fast to not be visible to men, but to your Father who sees in secret. Solitude befits fasting, helping the person to focus on the interior work with God, as talking hinders him from prayer and contemplation. Visits also prevent a person from his devotion to God and may lead him to fall into sins.

In His fasting, Christ the Lord withdrew in solitude to the mount, in sacred solitude with God the Father, dedicating Himself to contemplation. In like manner were the fasts of our fathers in the wilderness. As for you, withdraw in solitude to the best of your ability. If you are compelled to mingle with others, let it be out of necessity, and so rid yourself of wasted time and of any unprofitable conversations.

Fasting of the Tongue, Mind and Heart

Saint Isaac said, "Fasting of the tongue is better than that of the mouth, and fasting of the heart from lusts is better than both (tongue and mouth)". Many people are only concerned with the fasting of the mouth from food,

which is rebuked by the Lord when He says, “*Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man*” (Mt.15:11), thus showing us that erroneous words are a defilement. And also, our teacher James the Apostle said of the tongue that “*it defiles the whole body*” (Jas.3:6). So then, does your tongue join your body in fasting? And does your heart fast from lusts?

The fasting heart can make the tongue join it in fasting, “*For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*” (Mt.12:34). And again, as the Lord says, “*But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man*” (Mt.15:18), and also, “*A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things*” (Mt.12:35). That is why if your heart is fasting from sin, your tongue will be fasting from every unprofitable word.

He who can make his heart fast can make his body fast as well. Hence what matters is the fasting of the heart and mind from every erroneous desire. As for the fasting of the body, it is the least thing. Therefore, be heedful in your fasting to control your tongue, and in the same way that you refrain your mouth from eating, refrain your tongue from bad words, control your thoughts and discipline yourself.

Fasting Twinned with Self-Control

It is lovely to exercise self-control in every erroneous desire, whether it comes to you from within or from the devil's combats, for “*he who rules his spirit [is better] than he who takes a city*” (Prov.16:32). Take hold, then, of the reins of your will. In physical fasting, your body desires to eat, so you say to it, ‘No’, and you succeed in saying, ‘No’.

Use this same will in every thought, in every vain desire, in every bad behaviour, and in every carnal lust. But if a person controls his will only in food but is overcome by all other desires, then his fasting is but physical. He who cannot control himself in physical fasting will consequently not be able to control his mind, desires or behaviour. Controlling your desires is an indication of asceticism and love for God.

Subjecting the Body

When you fast, you are saying to your body, “Leave the spirit alone and release her from all your ties so that she can enjoy God”. You fast in order to untie yourself from the ties of the flesh. One of these ties is the desire for food. There are other ties such as fleshly desires. Hence in fasting, subjecting the flesh is by abstaining from marital sexual intimacy, but it must be with consent (1Cor.7:5), and as Joel the Prophet says regarding fasting, “*Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room*” (Joel 2:16). Of physical ornamenting during fasting, Daniel said that he did not anoint himself at all, and of the lust for food, he said, “*I ate no pleasant food*” (Dan.10:3). The subjecting of the body is not an aim in itself; it is but a means for the spirit.

Controlling the body is necessary in order that it does not deviate and bring about the downfall of the spirit. How serious are the words of Saint Paul, “*But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified*” (1Cor.9:27). When the body is brought into subjection, the spirit reins the situation, so that the body is not resisting but co-working with the spirit, yielding to her reins.

Therefore, discipline your body and distance it from all enjoyments, pleasures and lusts with discernment. It is

not enough that you fast, but you have to overcome the lust for food.

Asceticism

A man may abstain from food, and yet lust for it. Therefore, transcendence is not abstaining from food but renouncing it. Rising above the level of food leads to renouncing it and asceticism in it, and consequently, to the virtue of detachment. However, if you cannot attain to asceticism and detachment, then at least abandon something for the sake of God. Adam and Eve were required to abandon one fruit for the sake of God. It is known that abandoning food or a type of food is but training towards abandoning everything for the sake of God. As for you, what do you want to abandon in your fast for the sake of God, for the sake of His love and for the keeping of His commandments? God is not in need of you abandoning anything, but in doing so you prove that your love for Him has deepened and is being put into practice, and that for His love you are sacrificing your own desires.

Almsgiving

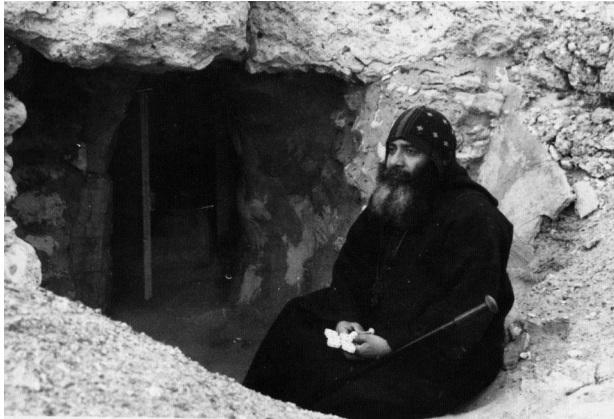
He who suffers hunger in fasting feels compassion on the hungry. Through this mercy God accepts his fast as He said, *"Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy"* (Mt.5:7). To show her concern for almsgiving, the Church sings during the period of Great Lent, *"Blessed are those who have mercy on the poor"*. Out of God's care for almsgiving, He said in the prophecy of Isaiah, *"Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?"* (Is.58:6,7).

In the era of the martyrs and confessors, the Church used to teach: If you do not have anything to give to the needy, fast and give them your food. This means that when you fast, you do not save the food for yourself, but should fast and give the food to the poor. That is why many churches are accustomed to laying tables of food for the poor called 'Agape', and in order not to cause embarrassment to the poor, the whole congregation eat together.

Fasting and Metanoias

Metanoias are consecutive prostrations accompanied by short prayers. The Church associates metanoias with the period of abstention. So on feast days, Saturdays and Sundays and the fifty days after the Resurrection there are no metanoias. The filled stomach does not suit metanoias, whether from the spiritual or the physical aspect. Therefore, metanoias are preferably done in the early morning or at any time during the period of abstention.

Metanoias can be a self-humbling before God. The person reproaches himself before God over a particular sin, asking forgiveness for it, saying, "I, Lord, sinned in so and so, forgive me. I defiled Your temple, forgive me. I who am lazy, forgive me. I who am careless, forgive me...". Metanoias can also be accompanied by prayers of thanksgiving and praise. There can be a spiritual preparation before practising the metanoias, such as giving account of oneself or any spiritual reading, to ignite the fervour of the heart.



Alone with God

Spiritual Training

As fasting is a holy spiritual period in which a person aims for spiritual growth, then it is appropriate that he set before him certain spiritual training in order to transform these spiritual desires into practical life. Spiritual training differs from person to person, depending on their needs; whether they need to address a certain weakness, acquire a certain virtue, or fulfil a spiritual desire in the heart. The training differs for the same individual depending on his needs at any particular time; what he needs now may not be what he needs at a different time, depending on his combats and his level of growth.

Spiritual training is vital; it provides the person with an objective to set before him in his fast, against which he can examine himself in order to come out of the fast with a clear outcome, besides the general virtues of fasting. The training we mention here are but examples. Each person should choose what suits him under the guidance of his father confessor as far as possible:

Training Specific to Fasting Itself

The aim of these exercises, among which are exercises in self-control, is to attain to a sound and advanced fasting. This may involve a person training himself to refrain from eating a certain food that he loves, either totally for the whole period of the fast, or partially for a certain period or number of days, by reducing the quantity, or by not asking for it. This training can also cover the day before the fast or the day of breaking the fast, so that eating on those days is not totally without restraint. It can also cover the subjection of the body and

the keeping away from bodily desires and amusements, as well as the keeping of vigils and the doing away with luxuries or non-essentials.

Training Specific to Repentance

This training includes focusing on the point of weakness or the cherished sin. Everyone knows the sin before which they weaken and into which they lapse. A person may take this cherished sin and train himself on how to leave it during the fast, thus his fast truly becoming holy. Or a person might train himself to stop a certain habit to which he has become addicted, such as smoking, drinking tea or coffee, or watching television. Another person may train himself to stop sins such as anger, judging others, or certain sins of the tongue.

The person can place before his eyes the verses related to these sins, and remind himself of them. Every time he falls into the sin of anger, for example, he would remind himself of the verse which says, *“for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God”* (Jas.1:20), repeating it many times daily, especially at the time of temptation, reproaching himself, saying, “What will I have gained from my fasting if I fall into wrath which does not produce the righteousness of God?”

If you fall into the sins of the tongue, place before you the verse which says, *“for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment”* (Mt.12:36), and reproach yourself, saying, “What benefit is it to me if I fast yet am unable to control my tongue and say to my brother, ‘You fool!’, so becoming worthy of hell fire?” (Mt.5:22).

Whenever you feel hungry and desire to eat, reproach yourself, saying to her, “When you leave this sin I will allow you to eat. Behold, the Holy Bible says, ‘If

anyone will not work, neither shall he eat' (2Thess.3:10) and you are not doing the work of repentance worthy of fasting nor worthy of a heart which is a dwelling place of God. What is the use of abstaining from food if I have not yet abstained from this sin which separates me from God? All my fasting will avail me nothing”.

Take your weak point and make it the subject of your prayers and strivings during this fast. Focus all your attention on it, through heedfulness and meticulousness, and by trying to resist it. Pour out your soul before God and say to Him, “Lord, save me from this sin. I acknowledge that I am weak in this point in particular, and that I can not prevail over it except through Your help. Have mercy, O Lord, on my weakness and my inability. I do not want this fast to end before you put an end to this sin from my life”.

Place before your eyes all the verses connected with that particular sin and recite them continually. Let the period of fasting be a period of wrestling with God to receive from Him the strength with which to overcome your sins. Train yourself in this wrestling, saying, “So long as fasting casts out demons, according to the words of the Holy Bible, may it cast out the demons that wage war against me in the sins before which I always weaken. May it cast out my sins seeing that, together with prayer, it is that which casts out demons”.

Training on Solitude and Silence

What we mean by solitude is being alone with God. Many retire in solitude at home without doing any spiritual work, but spend their time with the radio or television, with magazines or with chatting with others at home, or they may even withdraw with bad thoughts. This is not the solitude we mean. It must be a sacred solitude

for doing spiritual work which you undertake in your closed room with God, in which you withdraw with the Holy Bible, with the life-stories of the saints, with metanoias, with prayer.

If you have a spiritual programme, you will love solitude. And if you find yourself benefitting spiritually from your solitude, you will continue in it and feel that it is a blessing given you by God. Therefore, sit down and set this programme of solitude, so that you can put it into action. Try to do without your friends and leisures during this period in which God will be your True Friend. Train yourself to do without unprofitable chatter, and then you will be able to withdraw and work with God.

If you cannot withdraw during the whole duration of the fast then at least try for certain days, starting with once a week and increasing gradually. But if you cannot retire into yourself and keep yourself in the presence of God, what can you do? If you cannot close your doors, then at least close your lips from idle chatter. How easy it is for our talking with people to hinder our talking with God, and as one of the fathers said, "A talkative person is void from within" that is, he is void of the interior spiritual work of the heart: prayer, contemplation and spiritual recitations.

Training yourself on solitude will help you keep silence, and keeping silence will rid you of the sins of the tongue and give you a chance for the interior work, the work of the spirit. But what if a person cannot practise either total solitude or solitude on certain days? There is another exercise, which is to resist wasting time. There is a person whose main problem is wasting his time; his time is trivial in his eyes, and so he wastes it frivolously. This is his primary sin, resulting in him not having enough time for prayer, or reading or spiritual thinking,

and consequently leading him into tepidness and possibly sin. This person can say to himself, “During this fast I want to train myself to stop wasting my time, but instead to make use of it”. How can this be achieved?

Save the time wasted in talking with people, in meeting up with them, in visiting them, in useless discussions, in reading magazines and newspapers, in listening to the radio and watching the television, and in all sorts of amusements, and use that time instead for spiritual work with God. Everyone knows where they waste their time, and consequently, knows how to save it and make use of it, this time being a large portion of their life.

Abstinence of the Tongue

Saint Isaac said, “Fasting of the tongue is better than fasting of the mouth”. Train yourself to keep silence as far as you possibly can. If you are not able to, then use these three exercises:

- (1) Do not start a conversation except when necessary
- (2) Keep your answers short
- (3) Occupy your mind with spiritual work

Training on Contrition and Humility

Fasting days are days of contrition and self-humbling before God, so train yourself on these until your soul reaches the dust and ashes, through the following:

- (1) Evade the love of praise and words of boasting and self-praise
- (2) Use words of contrition in your prayers such as the words of Psalm 6, *“O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure”*
- (3) When you feel hungry or sit down to eat, say to yourself, “I do not deserve to eat because of my sins, for I have done so-and-so. I am not fasting out of holiness, but out of humiliation of soul”.

The person who attains contrition does not feel like eating, no matter how pleasant the food placed before him is. And if pressed hard by hunger, will say to himself, “Repent first, and then you can eat”, and if he finds himself still at fault, will say to himself in reproach, “Is this an acceptable fast before God? Is this a sanctified fast?”

- (4) Fasting days are a good opportunity for confession and self-reproach before God, before the father confessor, and within oneself. They are a period of being open with oneself, of giving account of self, and of reproaching and chastising oneself. Be on your guard to bring the blame on yourself, evading self-justification, no matter how easy the excuses for it are.
- (5) Follow the many exercises on humility

Training on Learning by Heart

You can also take the period of the fast as an opportunity to memorise verses, psalms, chapters from the Holy Bible, hymns and spiritual songs. For example you can train yourself to:

A Learn the Sermon on the Mount, which consists of 111 verses. If you learn 3 verses a day, you will complete it in 37 days

B Learn the litanies of the Agpeya which consist of 36 litanies, so if you were to learn one each day, you could complete them all in 36 days

C Learn the absolution prayers for each hour of the Agpeya, and the prayers repeated in each hour, such as the Trisagion, the Prayer of Thanksgiving, Psalm 51, and the Concluding Prayer

D Learn what you can of the psalms of the Agpeya, starting with the short psalms

E Learn selected verses from the Holy Bible. If you learn 3 verses each day, you could, in Great Lent alone, learn 150 verses.

F Learn famous chapters of the Holy Bible, such as chapter 13 of First Corinthians on love, or chapter 12 of Romans which is a group of golden verses about numerous virtues, or First Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 12-23, Ephesians chapter 6 verses 10-17 on spiritual warfare, Philippians chapter 3 verses 7-14, and similar chapters in the Holy Bible

G Take what you learn by heart as the subject of your contemplations, as your nourishment in the fast, and in order to put them into practice

H Repeat the prayers and psalms that you learn so as to add them to your daily prayers

I Set yourself a programme of memorising hymns and praises

And thus, finding yourself before a spiritual programme, you will feel the value of your time, leading you to be careful on how to use it to your advantage.

Training on Prayer

On fasting days, try to increase your programme of prayer; do not stop at the prayers of the Agpeya or your normal prayers. We place the following exercises before you, to use as far as you are able:

1 Training on Praying on the Road

You can be walking down the street whilst your heart is preoccupied with God, either through a psalm or a short prayer, such as, “Lord, forgive me! Do not count my iniquities against me... Have mercy on me, according to Your great mercy... Save me, Lord, from my weaknesses... Give me strength... Make these days, Lord, blessed days... Bless, Lord, the days of this fast... Give me, Lord, time to spend with You... Unite my heart, O Lord, with You... Fill me, Lord, with Your love... Give me grace, O Lord... Give me help, O Lord... Give me a holy life, O Lord... Give me a clean heart... Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow... Cleanse me, O Lord... Save me, O Lord... Preserve me from all evil... Co-work with me... Deal with me according to Your mercy, O Lord, and not according to my sins”.

2 Training on Prayer when with People

Whether you are in a meeting or with friends or family or amidst people anywhere, lift up your heart with a short prayer, thus though you are silent, your heart is busy within you, in fellowship with the Holy Spirit. The still and silent person can be the treasure of God’s

mysteries, and as the holy elder says, “Still your tongue that your heart may speak”.

3 *Training on Praying at Work*

Manual work is a great aid to prayer, as our fathers used to do with their handiwork. Yet even if your work is purely mental, every now and then, lift up your heart to God with a little prayer, “I missed You, Lord. I do not want to be far from You for long... Make me work for You... Bless all that I do... I love You, Lord, from all my heart and I long for You... I praise Your holy name in my work... Your sweet name is blessed in the mouths of your saints... I thank You, Lord, from all my heart... Bless me... Co-work with me... Let not this work separate me from being in constant communion with You... Nothing can separate me from the love of Christ”.

4 *Training on Contemplation in Prayer*

Take for example the psalms and prayers of the Agpeya as material for your spiritual meditations, so that when you pray them, your prayer will have depth. Do this also with the prayers of the Divine Liturgy and the Praises so that they will affect your heart when you pray them or when you hear them.

5 *Training on Prolonging Prayer*

Train yourself to prolong your prayer whenever you find that it is about to conclude, even for two minutes. Do not rush to bring it to a conclusion and leave God’s presence. Persevere and continue even for a short time, then ask God’s leave and conclude your prayer.

6 *Training on Purity and Spirituality of Prayer*

Train yourself to pray with understanding, with depth, with fervour, with desire, with humility and contrition and with concentration. If you cannot, practise the following training:

7 *Training on Praying for Prayer*

When Saint Isaac was asked, “How can we learn how to pray?”, he replied, “By praying”. Undoubtedly, prayer, like any spiritual work, is a *“perfect gift [is] from above, and comes down from the Father of lights”* (Jas.1:17). Therefore, seek it as the Apostles did, saying, *“Lord, teach us to pray”* (Lk.11:1). Say to Him, “Grant me, Lord, to pray. Give me a good time of devotion to You. Give me the words that I should say to You. Give me the desire to pray. Give me the love with which to love You, and so pray. Give me fervour in prayer and tears and reverence. Lord, I do not know how to pray; teach me and give me the appropriate feelings. You, Lord, talk to me so that I may be able to talk to You”.

8 *Training on Praying for Others*

Let not your prayers during your fasting be confined to yourself alone, but train yourself to pray for others too. Many have asked you to pray for them and you have not done so, so remember them during this fast. How numerous are those who need prayers who are in difficulty, affliction, sickness or spiritual need? Pray also for them. Pray for the departed. Pray for the Church, for the safety of the Country, for the general welfare, for those who do not know God, for atheists, for unbelievers and for the scornful. Pray for the sake of God’s Kingdom on earth. It is a beautiful training to pray for others and in particular:

9 *Training on Praying for Your Persecutors*

It is a Divine commandment more than training, for the Lord commanded that you *“pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you”* (Mt.5:44). Fasting is a good opportunity to train yourself in putting this commandment into practice. Pray that God may forgive your persecutors and save them from their state. Pray for

your love for them and their love for you so that your heart towards them may not change due to their maltreatment. Pray for their well-being. Pray that God may save you from condemning them, whether in your mind or before men.

You naturally pray for your loved ones, but it is beautiful to pray for your persecutors. Say to Him, “Keep them safe, O Lord. Save them, and forgive them. Give me grace in their eyes. Give me the grace to love them as much as I love my loved ones. Keep my heart pure towards them”.

10 Other Training Connected With Prayer

+ Train yourself to wake up early to pray. Let God be the first One you speak to in your day, even if with a short prayer, such as, “Thank You, Lord. Make it, O Lord, a blessed day. Grant that it be a holy day in which I please You”.

+ Train yourself on repeating the prayers of the saints. Search for them and use them in your own prayers.

+ Read spiritual books that give you ardour and prompt you to pray fervently.

+ Pray before you commence any work and before any visit or meeting.

11 Training on Other Spiritual Means

(a) Train yourself on reading spiritual books. Religious books are numerous and limitless, but during the holy days of the fast, as a period of devotion, your focus should be not on books that increase your knowledge and information, but on those that inflame your heart with God’s love and instil in you fervour to pray and prompt you vehemently to repent and lead a pure life. With such books be concerned, and you know best which books affect you spiritually. As for the rest of the religious books,

I do not ask you to refrain from them totally, but to give them second priority during fasting, whereas spiritual books and the life stories of the saints should be given the priority.

(b) Train yourself also on singing hymns and spiritual songs, especially those which have a prayerful spirit and through which you feel you are addressing God, which touch your feelings and affect your heart, singing them from your heart and with your spirit. You can memorise them and repeat them at any time.

(c) Train yourself also on practising metanoias. If you have been negligent, try to practise them during the fast.

12 Training on Certain Virtues

The deep spiritual feelings in fasting can be beneficial and made use of in acquiring any virtue which the heart yearns for, such as forgiveness, endurance, tranquillity, propriety in talking, respect for others, expending and giving, honesty in work, meticulousness, or discipline. If you come out of every fast perfecting one virtue, this undoubtedly will be a great spiritual gain.