

LENTEN FASTING

LESSONS FROM OLD RUSSIA

Lent in Russia was really something deep and profound, and people cherished it as a simple and direct way to God. We recalled that the

Fathers of the Church, who lived in the desert, fasted. All the monks in Russia fasted very much; everyone fasted, from the Czar to the housemaid. Fasting was very powerful in Russia. (For instance, when my father fasted, he would eat nothing but one potato.) People often lost twenty pounds or so, but it was not the loss of pounds that interested them; it was the spiritual meaning of the fast.

Fasting was a preliminary to prayer, and during Lent we prayed. People had time to pray, because the shops were closed for an hour or two each afternoon so that they could go to church and pray. But it was not something that people didn't want to do, or felt pushed into; not at all. A great love of prayer and fasting was evident all over.

Lent was a time of sorrow for one's sins. Russians really went into this sorrowing and tried to tell God all about it. You could see them in churches bowing low and asking God's forgiveness. But at the same time they were glad, because God forgives. Foreign visitors noticed the prayerful atmosphere.

Lent had a very special place in the life of Russians. They made sure that they participated in it and took it upon themselves. They discussed how to pray and how to fast; everybody wanted to know everyone else's ideas, for maybe the other person did Lent a little better than oneself. Lent was a whole

chunk of life that was really understood by the Russians as a time of prayer and love for God.



Catherine Doherty

Why do we consider fasting so tremendously important in the Eastern rite? Fasting means controlling one's appetites. It includes sex as well as food. In Russia married people did not cohabit during the six weeks of Lent, the two week fast before the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the four weeks of Advent, or certain other high feasts. Sex is an appetite too, so it is quite normal for us to abstain. This is not because it's sinful or dirty or wrong in any way, but just as when we abstain from food, another appetite—in order to be more alert, and to stand, as it were, on tip toes.

When I have disciplined myself, I can listen to God; whereas when my mind wanders, I can't. But when it's recollected and directed toward him, things happen.

We don't mean our mind as you understand the mind—the thing in our head that weighs everything. With fasting, it is the heart that begins to open up. For if your head is already in your heart you can begin to love; you're capable of going out of yourself toward another. For this reason, fasting is much revered in Russia.

Now, fasting from food will lead you to doubt the value of fasting, and to irritation. If you think that your fasting will lead you up to heaven, don't fast! It will lead you to doubt and to irritation, exactly in the same

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Pass It On! #8

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way as when you give up cigarettes (which is another way of fasting). I gave them up and know how it feels; and when you fast, that is exactly how you feel.

The moment we get into fasting, we also get into temptation. This is one of the things that takes a little time to understand. The evil one will present you with every reason for not continuing. That's why I turn to Our Lady, the woman who can crush his head with her heel. And I implore her to help me, because I know only too well that I can't do it by myself.

The first step in any fasting, be it from cigarettes, cookies, or whatever, is to look at Our Lady, because there is something very extraordinary about her. She bore a Child who was considered illegitimate, and that was a fast of persecution, although not known as such. All those who are trying to follow Christ will experience this fast of persecution at some time in their lives. But God has given her a heel that can squash the devil, and it is good to turn to her and ask her help.

Lent is so very difficult, because it is a time in which we face ourselves, and facing ourselves we discover many things about ourselves, among them our half-hearted service of God. We are like cross-eyed beings, with one eye always looking at what we can have, such as food, and the other looking at God and perhaps getting jaundiced in the process, because God

often seems unattractive against all those foods and whatever else.

Yet I have to contemplate food. I have to sort out my relation to all things and use them for God's purposes, because food is a very wonderful thing he has given to us. So also are my clothing and the warmth of this room. These are all things that he has given to me. I must meditate on the goodness of those things instead of meditating on how I am going to acquire more. I should worship the God who has given me things, instead of worshipping the things that God has given me and forgetting him. This is a matter for prayer and contemplation.

When you enter into the world of fasting, a great peace comes upon you and at the same time, a great restlessness. It is one of the moments in which God and Satan fight within your soul. The first temptation comes from Satan after even one day of fasting. He seems to find it insufferable if you are also praying.

The power of fasting and prayer extends from here to the ends of the earth. It really does. And the reason for doing them is love.

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