

Fasting and Health in the Orthodox Church

Introduction

Many people who have been Orthodox since they were born, “cradle Orthodox,” have experienced Orthodox fasting all of their lives, and know how to do it without thinking about it, and may not even be conscious of a “method” for doing so. Those of us who are converts, however, sometimes find this practice mysterious, difficult, and unhealthy. Some people attempt to fast but instead of feeling better, they come to feel so tired or generally unwell that they abandon the effort, and not only feel badly for failing to fast as we are called to do, but they also fail to gain the spiritual benefit from this wonderful practice. What follows is an attempt at a “primer” on how to practice what the Orthodox Church means by “fasting” in a way that only enhances our health, physical and spiritual.

Why Do We Fast?

Fasting is a small way of practicing a bit of the self-denial to which Jesus calls us. It helps us to liberate ourselves from a kind of slavery in which we feel that we *must* have what we want, that we’re not OK, we’re off-kilter, “something’s wrong” if we don’t get what we want. Fasting helps liberate us from endlessly focusing on trying to fulfill our own wishes and desires, and to focus more on God, and how our hunger teaches us about our dependence on God for our daily bread, and for everything else in our lives.

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. ... The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ’s statement, “Without Me you can do nothings (John 15:5). Met. Kallistos Ware, The Lenten Triodion.

And fasting is part of prayerful “joy-creating sorrow” of repentance, prayer, and almsgiving that help us prepare to experience the joy of Pascha.

Fasting and Health

The good news is that it is easy to get great nutrition and be healthy and well on a fasting regimen! (*By all means, if you have any medical issues or other risk factors or concerns, consult with your doctor about any concerns he or she may have about a vegan diet (a totally vegetarian diet) in your particular case.*) In fact, properly done, an Orthodox fasting diet is very much *more healthy* than what most Americans eat when we are not fasting! In the book of Genesis, the foods God provided in the Garden were all vegan! We did not begin eating meat until the Fall and the expulsion from Paradise. So there is a sense in which we can look at “fasting food” as returning to the food of Paradise!

Medical science confirms that a completely non-animal-based diet can be very healthy. Here is part of a statement by the American Dietetic Association (the comment on B12 is aimed at people who are living entirely as vegans, not “part-time” fasting):

It is the position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics that appropriately planned vegetarian, including vegan, diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate and may provide health benefits for the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. These diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, adolescence, older adulthood and for athletes. Plant-based diets are more environmentally sustainable than diets rich in animal products because they use fewer natural resources and are associated with much less environmental damage. Vegetarians and vegans are at reduced risk of certain health

conditions, including ischemic heart disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, certain types of cancer, and obesity. Low intake of saturated fat and high intakes of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, soy products, nuts, and seeds (all rich in fiber and phytochemicals) are characteristics of vegetarian and vegan diets that produce lower total and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels and better serum glucose control. These factors contribute to reduction of chronic disease. Vegans need reliable sources of vitamin B-12, such as fortified foods or supplements.

[At the time of this writing, the full statement can be found here: <http://www.eatrightpro.org/~media/eatrightpro%20files/practice/position%20and%20practice%20papers/position%20papers/vegetarian-diet.ashx>]

How to Begin

We all know that we need a “balanced diet,” and it may not be obvious exactly what that is to people who are new to eating without any meat, poultry, fish, eggs, or dairy products. These days there is a wide variety of prepared vegan foods that can make this reassuringly simple and easy for people who are new to this practice.

There is a balance to be found, though. At one extreme, someone who prepares lusciously satisfying meals with vegetarian “meat,” non-dairy margarine, etc., and tofu “ice cream” has missed the point that simplicity, and the self-denial to which Jesus calls us, are at the heart of fasting. At the other extreme, however, someone who spends a fast obsessing about food preparation in order to be scrupulous in fasting the “perfect” way has also missed the point about simplifying our lives, “eating to live, rather than living to eat,” devoting less of our time and energy to indulging our desires, and more to repentance and prayerful preparation for the spiritual feast that the fast anticipates.

Especially for people who are new to vegetarian food, there are two very easy ways to eat without meat, poultry, fish, dairy, etc., that can be very handy:

- Substitute vegetarian ingredients in some of your usual recipes.
- Use some pre-packaged vegetarian foods.

Substitute Vegetarian Ingredients in Some of Your Usual Recipes

These days, most grocery stores have meatless “ground beef,” “sausage,” “meatballs,” “burgers,” etc., which can be used in many typical recipes that use these meats. You also can find dried “TVP,” or “Textured Vegetable Protein” bits, and “seitan” or gluten, the protein from wheat, which has a very meaty texture, in stores like Whole Foods that tend to stock many vegan food items. All of these can be used in soups, stews, and many pasta dishes. Purists may object to replacing meat with something that closely resembles meat, but especially for people who are new to vegetarian food, it can be reassuringly simple to make spaghetti with “meat sauce” containing a vegetarian “ground beef” or meatless “sausage” or meatless “meatballs.” One can make vegetarian chili this way, vegetarian tacos, meatless vegetable soup, etc.. Beans (pinto, kidney, garbanzo, black, etc.) have a lot of protein, and many Mexican-style dinners can be prepared with beans and rice, bean tacos, bean burritos, etc.. Beans go well in soups and even salads! If it was a balanced meal with meat, it will almost certainly still be a balanced meal if you merely substitute these vegetarian ingredients for the meat, and probably even healthier!

Use Some Prepared or Pre-Packaged Vegetarian Foods

Vegetarian “Burgers,” “Wings,” Roasts, Etc.

One “staple” for many people on a vegetarian diet are meatless “burgers” and similar products like “chicken” patties, etc.. There are also vegetarian “sausages,” vegetarian “wings,” even vegetarian “meat loaf” and “roasts” made of soy and/or wheat gluten (“seitan”) that can simply be heated and served.

Beans and Rice, and “Dirty Rice”

Another staple for many vegetarians is beans and rice, a classic “third world” staple. It's very easy to heat up a can of red beans, black beans, pinto beans, etc., and cook some rice to go along with it, and sauteeing some onions and garlic to go into the beans, perhaps adding a little cumin as well, or Latin-style “adobo” seasoning, or countless other prepared seasoning mixes, can make a can of beans very tasty. But there also are boxed, easily prepared foods including “Black Beans and Rice” and “Red Beans and Rice” that many people find easy, simple, and tasty, as well as a Louisiana-style “Dirty Rice” mix (normal “Dirty Rice” is a Louisiana-style dish that contains rice and some form of meat, often hamburger, sausage, etc.) that you can use vegetarian “hamburger” in instead of real hamburger. It is easy to provide some variety by throwing in some chopped onions, peppers, carrots, zucchini, tomatoes, or other fresh, canned or frozen vegetables.

Salads

Adding a few canned beans to a salad, with some other veggies, can make a simple salad a balanced meal, and it's quick and easy to prepare. Practically any kind of leftovers from other meals can go into a salad and be surprisingly tasty, and a very easy meal.

Other Prepared Foods

There are also frozen, canned, and even fully cooked in-a-pouch Mexican, Indian, Thai, Chinese and other pre-packaged meals, as well as frozen pierogies, vegetarian casseroles and more.

Hummus

Hummus is another standard food for many during fasts because it's simple and quick. Hummus is a dip that is protein-rich because garbanzo beans are its main ingredient. Many people will make a breakfast or lunch of just a little bread and hummus, and adding a salad can make it a light supper.

A Few Cautions

A few cautions: Many “vegetarian” products are not vegan, and may contain butter or cheese, egg whites, and casein, a protein that comes from milk. Different people have different opinions about whether some or any of these are acceptable for an Orthodox fast. Some people might be concerned about the spices in some of these foods, and would suggest that fasting food should be much more simple and plain. One reason that many people find products like those described above handy, though, is that they are so quick and easy to prepare. Part of the point in fasting is “eating to live, not living to eat,” so taking a great amount of time and effort to prepare a “perfect fasting meal” in some ways might also be seen as investing too much of oneself in food or food preparation. When in doubt, ask your priest.

Patristics Section:

“How Should We Conduct Ourselves During Meals?”

Never begin lunch or dinner, or finish them, without fervent prayer to the Lord God as, unfortunately, very many Christians of our time do. One cannot but marvel at how these Christians have reached such a condition of soul that they can both start a meal and finish it without a fervent prayer to the Lord God. For it is precisely the Lord God Who supplies us with all our food. Granted, we ourselves also worked to obtain our food, but what would all our work amount to if the Lord God did not give us His blessing if, for example, He did not bestow the proper warmth, moisture, wind and sun on the fields and gardens that we have cultivated and sown? Absolutely nothing, as, of course, everyone knows. Besides, it is precisely the Lord God Who furnishes our food with nourishing properties, and our bodies with an ability to use these nourishing properties for our bodily health. What would happen to us if the Lord God had not given nutritional quality to our food? Then no matter how much of even the most nutritious food we consumed, we would not gain bodily strength, and therefore would be able neither to carry out our daily bodily functions nor to continue life itself. Then none of us would remain alive. On the other hand, what would happen to us if the Lord God took away from our stomachs the power of digestion, if only for two weeks? Then even the most nourishing food would not nourish us, but exhaust us and lead us into illness or deprive us of life itself. For experience bears witness that sometimes the healthiest food can be harmful.

Our meals should always be moderate. All the saints, who customarily watched strictly after themselves, say with one voice: 1) that very little is needed for satisfaction of our bodies; 2) that our bellies by themselves almost never know moderation; 3) that our bellies sometimes demand food even when they have had more than enough, and 4) that therefore to maintain moderation it is best to cease consumption of food when the urge to eat has still not completely subsided. St. John Chrysostom gave an excellent rule for observing necessary moderation in food: "Eat just enough to alleviate your hunger." Another holy teacher said "You should not eat whatever you want, but eat what you have, and in a way that after eating and drinking, you still feel an urge for food."

Speaking of food, the saints very forcefully observed that lay people should consume very little, and that for monks, widowers, and widows it is best to completely avoid foods that are filling, stimulating, indigestible, good-tasting, or sweet. Good-tasting or sweet foods because we very easily overindulge in such, and nutritious, stimulating, or indigestible foods because these in particular stir up the bad tendencies of our flesh, and because while using them it is almost impossible to restrain and destroy these tendencies. Food is, however, necessary for the body. We should not refuse the body necessary food. On the one hand, we need to satisfy the natural demand of nature that we support our health and bodily powers, which are necessary for satisfaction of various needs of body and soul. On the other hand, while lacking food necessary for the body, we may stir up against ourselves an enemy, who perhaps otherwise would not even think of being our enemy.

At meals, especially dinner, never consume food immoderately or to excess. Our food is a gift from God, and all gifts of God, being divine, should be received reverently, decorously, with the fear of God, and consumed only for the purpose for which they are given. Our food is given to us not for satiety, but for satisfaction.

Satiety is extremely harmful for our body, because stomach disorder, corruption of the blood,

various diseases of the body, and premature death are in great part a result of excess or intemperance. Doctors, experience, and the Spirit of God attest to this. For excess of meats bringeth sickness. . . by surfeiting have many perished, says the Wise One (Ecclus 37:33,34).

Satiety is extremely harmful for the soul. Whoever overindulges in food or drink is incapable of spiritual exercises and can neither pray nor reflect on anything divine, because excess in food draws a person into laziness, sleepiness, idleness, idle talk, ludicrous behavior, and a great multitude of impure thoughts and desires. And for inflammation of anger and love of pleasure it often plays the same role as oil poured onto fire. In general, whoever overeats does not have the true God, but his own flesh and its desires. Therefore, whoever overeats is capable of violating even the holiest obligations and is prepared to commit the most vile acts. Whoever has observed himself and those close to him to any extent needs no proof in this regard.

Excerpted from "How Should We Conduct Ourselves During Meals?" Chapter 6 from *How to Live a Holy Life* by Metropolitan Gregory of St. Petersburg (1784-1860)

The Meaning Of The Great Fast

(Selections from Bishop Kallistos Ware's essay in the Lenten Triodion)

'We waited, and at last our expectations were fulfilled', writes the Serbian Bishop Nikolai of Ochrid, describing the Easter service at Jerusalem. 'When the Patriarch sang "Christ is risen", a heavy burden fell from our souls. We felt as if we also had been raised from the dead. All at once, from all around, the same cry resounded like the noise of many waters. "Christ is risen" sang the Greeks, the Russians, the Arabs, the Serbs, the Copts, the Armenians, the Ethiopians - one after another, each in his own tongue, in his own melody. . . . Coming out from the service at dawn, we began to regard everything in the light of the glory of Christ's Resurrection, and all appeared different from what it had yesterday; everything seemed better, more expressive, more glorious. Only in the light of the Resurrection does life receive meaning.¹

This sense of resurrection joy, so vividly described by Bishop Nikolai, forms the foundation of all the worship of the Orthodox Church ; it is the one and only basis for our Christian life and hope. Yet, in order for us to experience the full power of this Paschal rejoicing, each of us needs to pass through a time of preparation. ' We waited,' says Bishop Nikolai, 'and at last our expectations were fulfilled.' Without this waiting, without this expectant preparation, the deeper meaning of the Easter celebration will be lost.

So it is that before the festival of Easter there has developed a long preparatory season of repentance and fasting, extending in present Orthodox usage over ten weeks. First come twenty-two days (four successive Sundays) of preliminary observance; then the six weeks or forty days of the Great Fast of Lent; and finally Holy Week. Balancing the seven weeks of Lent and Holy Week, there follows after Easter a corresponding season of fifty days of thanksgiving, concluding with Pentecost.

... the utmost care is needed, so as to preserve a proper balance between the outward and the inward.... Man is a unity of body and soul, 'a living creature fashioned from natures visible and invisible, in the words of the Triodion;² and our ascetic fasting should therefore involve both these natures at once. The tendency to over-emphasize external rules about food in a legalistic way, and the opposite tendency to scorn these rules as outdated and unnecessary, are both alike to be deplored as a betrayal of true Orthodoxy. In both cases the proper balance between the outward and the inward has been impaired.

... One reason for this decline in fasting is surely a heretical attitude towards human nature, a

false 'spiritualism' which rejects or ignores the body, viewing man solely in terms of his reasoning brain. As a result, many contemporary Christians have lost a true vision of man as an integral unity of the visible and the invisible; they neglect the positive role played by the body in the spiritual life, forgetting St. Paul's affirmation: "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. . . glorify God with your body' (1 Cor. 6 : 19-20). ...

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. ... The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, "Without Me you can do nothings (John 15:5). ...

If it is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting, it is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting is not a mere matter of diet. It is moral as well as physical. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal to our Father's house. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means 'abstinence not only from food but from sins'. 'The fast', he insists, 'should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body': the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice.³ It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: 'You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother'.⁴ The same point is made in the Triodion, especially during the first week of Lent:

As we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. . . .

Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord.

True fasting is to put away all evil,

To control the tongue, to forbear from anger,

To abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury.

If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God.

Let us keep the Fast not only by reframing from food,
but by becoming strangers to all the bodily passions.⁵

The inner significance of fasting is best summed up in the triad: prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Divorced from prayer and from the reception 'of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. It leads, not to contrition and joyfulness, but to pride, inward tension and irritability. ...

Always in our acts of abstinence we should keep in mind St. Paul's admonition not to condemn others who fast less strictly: 'Let not him who abstains pass judgement on him who eats' (Rom. 14:3). Equally, we remember Christ's condemnation of outward display in prayer, fasting or almsgiving (Matt. 6:1-18). ...

If we are to understand correctly the text of the Triodion and the spirituality that underlies it, there are five misconceptions about the Lenten fast against which we should guard. In the first place, the Lenten fast is not intended only for monks and nuns, but is enjoined on the whole Christian people. ...

In the second place, the Triodion should not be misconstrued in a Pelagian sense. If the Lenten texts are continually urging us to greater personal efforts, this should not be taken as implying that our progress depends solely upon the exertion of our own will. On the contrary, whatever we achieve in the Lenten fast is to be regarded as a free gift of grace from God. ...

In the third place, our fasting should not be self-willed but obedient. When we fast, we should not try to invent special rules for ourselves, but we should follow as faithfully as possible the accepted pattern set before us by Holy Tradition. . . . Where it seems that the traditional regulations are not applicable to our personal situation, we should seek the counsel of our spiritual father not in order legalistically to secure a “dispensation” from him, but in order humbly with his help to discover what is the will of God for us. Above all, if we desire for ourselves not some relaxation but some piece of additional strictness, we should not embark upon it without our spiritual father’s blessing....

In the fourth place, paradoxical though it may seem, the period of Lent is a time not of gloom but of joyfulness. It is true that fasting brings us to repentance and to grief for sin, but this penitent grief, in the vivid phrase of St. John Climacus, is a ‘joy-creating sorrow’.⁶ The Triodion deliberately mentions both tears and gladness in a single sentence:

*Grant me tears falling as the rain from heaven, O Christ,
As I keep this joyful day of the Fast.⁷*

It is remarkable how frequently the themes of joy and light recur in the texts for the first day of Lent:

With joy let us enter upon the beginning of the Fast.

Let us not be of sad countenance. . . .

Let us joyfully begin the all-hallowed season of abstinence;

And let us shine with the bright radiance of the holy commandments. . . .

All mortal life is but one day, so it is said,

To those who labour with love.

There are forty days in the Fast:

Let us keep them all with joy.⁸

Metropolitan Philaret of New York

What an amazing and un-Christian relationship so many people now have to these fasts. The fasts are violated by people without a qualm of conscience, as if the matter was about some nonsense which had no significance. The Church, on the other hand, takes a very serious view of the matter, and excludes from Holy Communion those who refuse to keep the fasts without cause. Indeed, St Seraphim of Sarov very pointedly said, "One who does not observe the fasts is not a Christian, no matter what he considers or calls himself ... and you should not pay attention to him, no matter what he says."

Fasting is absolutely indispensable for man. From the external aspect, it is a struggle of filial obedience to God, Who has given us the rules of fasting through His Holy Spirit. From the inner aspect, fasting is a struggle of restraint and self-limitation. In this lies the great value and sense of fasting, since a strict observance of fasts tempers one's will and perfects the character of one who is firm in his religious convictions and actions. Let us not forget that Christ Himself fasted, and foretold that His apostles would also fast.

We hear people claiming that fasting is harmful to the health. But strict fasting is not required of people who are ill, and they fast only according to their strength. Most important, one should remember that it is only those people who do not fast who speak about the "harm to health" of fasting. But those who do observe fasting will never say this, for they know from personal experience that not only is fasting not harmful, but it is positively beneficial to bodily health.

Fasting is not merely a restraining from food. During the days of the fasts, the Church sings, "While fasting bodily, let us also fast spiritually..." True fasting includes deeds of Christian mercy. It is an alienation of the evil-one, a restraint of the tongue, a laying aside of anger, a cutting off of vices and an exposure of falsehood... Thus, for a Christian, fasting is a time of restraint and self-education in all respects, and a real Christian fast gives believers a great moral satisfaction. The great teacher of Christian asceticism Bishop Theophan the Recluse says of fasting:

"Fasting appears gloomy until one steps into its arena. But begin and you will see what light it brings after darkness, what freedom from bonds, what release after a burdensome life...."

Three Helpful Principles of Fasting

We need a guide

... what Fr. _____ advises is what is right for you, for he knows your soul and your weaknesses. It is best when the sanctifying practices of the Church are applied by an experienced guide, i.e., your Father-Confessor.

Eat simply, stop before satiety

What is one of the things Jesus said about the Law? It can be summed up in two phrases: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. In this vein, I would like to suggest that all of the ostensibly confusing rules about fasting, above and beyond the foundational "no animal products, olive oil, or wine" rule—as helpful, though as hard to obtain consensus on today, as they are—can be summed up in two phrases: Eat simply, and stop before satiety. What do I mean by this? First, eating simply means that one's food preparation should not be of the normal, non-fasting type: sumptuous, fattened, and designed to excite the palate. This only reinforces one's love for food. This does not mean that the preparation should result in food that is repugnant. Rather, it means that it should not inflame one's desire for more, nor incite one (e.g., overly spicy or rich-tasting recipes). It should be such that it is simple, meager, and life-sustaining. It is still permissible for the food to be interesting and pleasant to eat (after all, it is not a sin to enjoy food in moderation). In this way one avoids being pharisaical. What would be an example of Pharisaism in the Fast? Aside from judging one's brother because they do not keep the fast "like I do," it would entail keeping the letter of the fasting rules but overlooking the weightier matters of simplicity and stopping short of satiety. Thus, one eats a delightful and extensive plate of Chinese food and then tops it off with a piece of tofu chocolate cheesecake (we have such things in our area!)—all "Lenten" of course. One could go through all of Lent "keeping the law" in this manner, never feeling hunger, never denying the palate's desires (are there not so many vegan options these days, given the chameleon-like tofu?), even gaining weight! This is sad but true. Avoid such a pitfall. If you eat simply then all of the debate about whether margarine is OK, or beer on a non-wine day, or whatever, are put in perspective. Such rules can be helpful guides, but they should not become your focus. One will find a difference of opinion on these "gray areas" wherever one turns (this is why you should just do what Fr. _____ says concerning such things). Some say margarine is "WRONG," others say it is not; some say beer should not be allowed on (non-wine & oil) fasting days etc., ad nauseum. And

even if you were to get all the gray areas "right," you could still prepare a cornucopia of very tasty food and violate the spirit of the Fast. "Sumptuous eating deprives us of piety" (St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite). This leads to the matter of something to which I have already alluded: quantity. This is relative for each person. One man's buffet is another man's morsel. There are, however, general rules discernible from the Holy Fathers. Especially during a Fast or on the Wednesday and Friday regular fasts, one should simply eat to sustain life (which is a far smaller quantity of food than we think—one of the reasons for the three days of total abstinence to start off Lent: shrinking the stomach), which means stopping short of satiety at each meal. For you this may mean three small meals a day. For others it may mean one. It depends upon one's physical makeup, job, etc. It is a matter for one's Father-Confessor, as is all of this. Now, as to how satiety is defined. If you are like me, it can be difficult to determine when you are nearing the point of satiety. This is in part due to the problem of nailing down an clear and Orthodox definition of this term. I kept running across the word in Orthodox writings, but it was never adequately defined until I discovered the book I am about to mention. But let me first give you the definition from Webster's New World Dictionary: "The state of being satiated; surfeit." The word "sate" is defined as "having had enough or more than enough, sated;... 1. [Now Rare] to satisfy to the full; gratify completely 2. to provide with more than enough, so as to weary or disgust; glut; surfeit.... in current use sate almost always implies...a being filled or stuffed so full that all pleasure or desire is lost;...surfeit implies a being filled or supplied to nauseating or disgusting excess...."

These definitions are useful, but they need some refinement in order fully to grasp the Orthodox use of the term. The little-known gem Elder Basil of Poiana Marului: His Life and Writings (St. John of Kronstadt Press, 1996) has been very helpful to me in this matter. This is a very important book, and it ultimately clarified things for me. Elder Basil was the spiritual father of St. Paisii Velichkovsky, one of the Saints behind the Philokalia. Elder Basil's writings mainly consist of introductions to themes and books in the Philokalia. The latter is, if you do not already know, mainly for spiritually advanced people. (There are, however, some sections of the Philokalia that can be read by beginners, like the Ascetic Discourse by St. Mark the Ascetic, among other things.) The Elder writes introductions and overviews that help the average or beginning struggler (particularly monks) to grasp the rudiments of the ascetic life. Here are some excerpts concerning fasting, and especially the term "satiety." Each one gives a slightly different translation of the same passage from St. Gregory of Sinai. I thought that all three variations were helpful to the task of discerning how much we should eat. Keep in mind that these passages are speaking of the continual life of a monk outside of Lent. However, the principles therein are very instructive for us:

* * *

Adopting such a rule concerning food, do not put all of your effort and hope in fasting alone. Instead, while fasting according to your measure and strength, concentrate on noetic work. If you have the strength to be satisfied with bread and water, then that is good. It is said that no other foods strengthen the body as bread and water do. However, do not think that by doing this, you are practicing some virtue in fasting, expecting to acquire self-restraint by fasting. If you are weak, let your fasting be with discernment, says St. Dorotheos.

St. Gregory of Sinai gives these directions:

-- You who strive after salvation should be satisfied with one litra [3/4 lb.] of bread and three or

four cups of water or wine a day, and a little of any other victuals which may be to hand. You must not let yourself eat to satiety. By thus eating all kinds of food you can both avoid boastfulness and avoid disdainning God's creations which are most excellent; and you thank God for everything. Such is the reasoning of the wise! If you eat all the kinds of food at hand and drink a little wine, but doubt your salvation because of this, this is lack of faith and a disability of thought....

-- The measure of partaking of food that is free from sin and pleasing to God has three degrees: abstinence, adequacy and satiety. To abstain means to remain a little hungry after eating; to eat adequately means neither to feel hungry nor weighed down. But eating beyond satiety is the door to gluttony through which lust comes in. But you, firm in this knowledge, choose what is best for you, according to your powers, without violating the established rule: for the perfect, according to the apostle, whether they be satisfied or in hunger, are mighty in all ways" [Philippians 4:12-13] (p. 53)

* * *

Whoever wants to be instructed in this first let him understand and do what St. Maximos said, "Provide for the body according to its strength and devote all your struggle to the mind." And again, "Physical virtues are pleasing [to God] if they are done with humility; without this our labor is in vain." And likewise, "Do not devote all of your effort to the flesh, but set it a limit of abstinence corresponding to its strength and turn your whole mind towards internal matters; for bodily training is of little benefit."

St. Hesychios says of this:

-- He that does not know how to travel the spiritual path does not take concern or correct his passionate thoughts, but devotes all of his exercise and care to the flesh. Such a person is either a glutton and dissipated, or gets depressed, loses his temper, holds grudges and thus darkens his mind, or through excessive abstinence he misses the mark and disturbs his mind.

Again, St. Diadochos says:

-- The same way as the body, being weighed down by abundance of food, makes the mind somehow cowardly and ill-tempered, so also it can weaken the mind through excessive abstinence and bring it to a state that is somewhat feeble and disinclined to behold worthy ideas. In opposition to bodily movements, one should make proper use of food, so that when the body is healthy it be wearied as much as is needful. But when it is ailing, let it be strengthened moderately. For the ascetic should not exhaust his body but provide for it so as to be able to practice his asceticism.

Yet again, St. John Climacus says, "I have seen this enemy put at ease and imparting vigilance to the mind" and so on. For we ought to have a body that is healthy but not uncontrolled, because noetic work requires physical strength. Therefore one must mightily flee from both excessive fasting and from laxity.

We recommend the rule laid down by St. Gregory of Sinai, who said of this:

-- For those who are still forcing themselves, a pound of bread is sufficient, and three or four cups of water or wine, according to the day, is enough for one who wants to find God. As for the sweets that may be at hand, take a little of each but not to satiety, so as to escape conceit and not disdain the good creations of God, giving thanks to Him for everything. Such is the reasoning of the wise. For those who are weak in the faith, abstinence in food is very beneficial, for it is them that the apostle commands to eat greens [Romans 14:2], because they do not believe that they are protected by God.

-- There are three degrees of eating: abstinence, adequacy and satiety. Abstinence is when one is hungry after eating. Adequacy is when one is neither hungry nor weighed down. Satiety is when one is weighed down a little. To eat beyond satiety is the door to gluttony through which lust enters in. And so, examine all this and choose what is suited for your strength, without violating the rules. It is for the perfect, and this is according to the apostle, to go hungry and to be filled and in all things to be strong [Philippians 4:12-13] (pp. 77-79).

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While we have seen many of the saints performing fastings and labors that surpass human nature, on our part we must learn from many fathers with divine vision not to want to undertake those disciplines that surpass human nature, because we have not received that sort of power and heavenly fire. It is better for us to submit ourselves to the divine Gregory of Sinai and follow his rules which are good and measured, because he writes saying:

-- For those who are struggling one pound of bread is enough and for the one who wants to find God let him also eat a bit of all the foods which happen to be at hand, just enough not to be sated, in order to avoid conceit and also so as not to despise the good creation of God, but to be thankful for everything. This is the discernment of the wise. As for those who are weak in faith or in soul, it would be better to abstain from such foods. These are the ones the apostle commands to eat greens, since they do not believe that they are protected by God [Romans 14:2].

-- There are three levels of partaking of food: abstinence, adequacy and satiety. The first means to be still hungry after you have eaten (that is, to get up from the table still a little hungry). Adequacy means to be neither hungry nor to be weighed down with food, while satiety is to be somewhat weighed down with the food. To eat beyond satiety (this means to eat after you have left the table or the meal) is the gate of the stomach through which lust enters in. Therefore, discerning these things, choose for yourself what is best suited to your strength without going beyond the limits of our rule. Because it is possible only for the perfect, according to what the apostle says, to be both hungry and filled and yet to be powerful in all things [Philippians 4:12-13].

The blessed Nil Sorsky says the same. He says that the measure for beginners is to leave the table slightly hungry, and if someone eats enough to be satisfied this is not a sin. However, if a person becomes somewhat weighed down with the food, he should reproach himself and then he will achieve victory (pp. 117-119).

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There is also an instructive passage in *A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*, by St. Nicodemos (Chapter 6):

The Three Degrees of Eating

-- According to St. Gregory the Sinaite there are three degrees in eating: temperance, sufficiency, and satiety. Temperance is when someone wants to eat some more food but abstains, rising from the table still somewhat hungry. Sufficiency is when someone eats what is needed and sufficient for normal nourishment. Satiety is when someone eats more than enough and is more than satisfied. Now if you cannot keep the first two degrees and you proceed to the third, then, at least, do not become a glutton, remembering the words of the Lord: "Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger" (Lk 6:25). Remember also that rich man who ate in this present life sumptuously every day, but who was deprived of the desired bosom of Abraham in the next life, simply because of this sumptuous eating. Remember how he longed to refresh his tongue with a drop of water. St. Basil not only did not forgive the young people who ate to satiety but also those who ate until satisfied; he preferred that all eat temperately. He said, "Nothing subdues and controls the body as does the practice of temperance. It is this temperance that serves as a control to those youthful passions and desires." St. Gregory the Theologian has also noted in his poetry: "No satiety has brought forth prudent behavior; for it is in the nature of fire to consume matter. And a filled stomach expels refined thoughts; it is the tendency of opposites to oppose each other. "Job, too, assuming that one could fall into sin through eating, offered sacrifice to God for his sons who were feasting among themselves. "And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said: 'It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts'" (Jb 1:5-8). In interpreting this passage Olympiodoros wrote: "We learn from this that we ought to avoid such feasts which can bring on sinfulness. We must also purify ourselves after they have been concluded, even if these are conducted for the sake of concord and brotherly love as in the case of the sons of Job." Surely then, if the sons of Job were not at a feast but in prayer or some other spiritual activity, the devil would not have dared to destroy the house and them, as Origen interpreted the passage: "The devil was looking for an opportunity to destroy them. Had he found them reading, he would not have touched the house, having no reason to put them to death. Had he found them in prayer, he would not have had any power to do anything against them. But when he found an opportune time, he was powerful. What was the opportune time? It was the time of feasting and drinking." Do you see then, dear reader, how many evils are brought forth by luxurious foods and feasting in general?

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Here is a short quote from *The Little Russian Philokalia*, Vol. II, from the *Counsels of Elder Nazarius of Valaam*:

-- And so, partake of the dishes which are offered in silence and with prayer, and do everything as written above. At the same time guard yourself carefully also in this: Satisfy your body with food in such a way that you do not feel full or heavy, but have still a little hunger and thirst. Nourish rather your soul with the God-inspired words and lives of the Holy Fathers which are read during trapeza. . . .

-- Having reflected thus, at least say to yourself from your whole soul and with heartfelt sorrow: Eat, unworthy one, enough so that you will not die. Dry up your body; confine your insatiable desires; grieve and belittle yourself. Will not the most merciful Lord look down upon this grief and contrition of my heart which are justly deserved? Even though my contrition itself is imperfect and insufficient, will not God Who is endless in mercy still have mercy on me and forgive the great evils that I have done?

-- Constantly reflecting thus and reproaching yourself, decide for yourself how much you should eat and drink every day to satisfy the needs of nature. Avoid as much as possible not merely overeating, but even eating just enough to be full. Keep in mind what was said above, that one should eat and drink only to the point where one is still a little hungry and thirsty.

* * *

And finally, this helpful passage from The Prologue from Ochrid, by St. Nikolai Velimirovich (Volume 4, p 338):

-- Bodily purity is primarily attained through fasting, and through bodily purity comes spiritual purity. Abstinence from food, according to the words of that son of grace, St. Ephraim the Syrian, means: 'Not to desire or demand much food, either sweet or costly; to eat nothing outside the stated times; not to give oneself over to gratification of the appetite; not to stir up hunger in oneself by looking at good food; and not to desire one or another sort of food.'

* * *

If you adhere to these two principles, checking yourself with a third (below), everything falls into place. No longer does one have to fret over the various secondary rules. If you keep these two principles you will fast better than most of those in the Church who even fast at all. For most of those who do "keep the Fast," do so in a way that evinces adherence merely to the most basic rules and not to the grace-bestowing spirit of the Fast. Thus, their efforts are in vain.

I mentioned a third principle. This is really more of a litmus question you can ask to help determine whether you are walking on the Royal Way. It is, "Do I regularly feel 'light' and at peace in body, frequently a little hungry (i.e., a "humility in flesh," or a measure of bodily weakness)—but not overly distracted or continually troubled by hunger—and disposed towards prayer?" (Another similar question: "Is the food I am about to eat something I need for strength of body—that my soul might not be overly burdened with bodily needs—or am I eating out of mere pleasure or boredom?") On this matter St. Dorotheos of Gaza writes in his Discourses and Sayings:

-- Everyone who wants to purify himself of the sins of the whole year during these days must first of all restrain himself from the pleasure of eating. For the pleasure of eating, as the Fathers say, caused all man's evil. Likewise he must take care not to break the fast without great necessity or to look for pleasurable things to eat, or weigh himself down by eating and drinking until he is full.

-- There are two kinds of gluttony. There is the kind which concerns taste: a man does not want to eat a lot but he wants it to be appetizing. It follows that such a person eats the food that pleases him and is defeated by the pleasure of it. He keeps the food in his mouth, rolling it round and round, and has not the heart to swallow it because he enjoys the taste. This is called fastidiousness (*lairmagia*). Another man is concerned about satisfying himself. He doesn't ask for fancy food nor does he care especially about whether the taste is nice or not, he only wants to eat and fill his stomach. This is gluttony. I will tell you how it gets this name: *margainein* means to rage furiously, to be mad; according to the profane, *margos* is the name given to the man who rages furiously or is mad. When this disease or mania for packing his belly full of food comes upon a man, therefore, it is called *gastromargia*, the madness of the stomach, whereas *lairmargia* is the madness of the palate. These must be guarded against and abandoned seriously by the man who desires to be cleansed of his sins. They accord not with the needs of the body, but with its vicious inclinations, and if they are tolerated, they lead a man into sin. As is the case with legitimate marital union and fornication, the practice is the same but the object is different. In the one case, there is copulation in order to raise a family, in the other, to satisfy a desire for pleasure. The same is true with feeding: in one case it is a question of the body's needs and in the other of eating for pleasure. The intention is what makes it a sin. A man eats to satisfy a need when he lays down how much he will take each day and, if what he has determined overloads him, takes a little less, or if he is not overloaded and his body is weakened, adds a little. And so he estimates exactly his need, and he bases his conclusion not on pleasure but on preserving the strength of his body. And what he takes he receives with prayer, deeming himself unworthy of that comfort and he is not on the look out to see if others, as is likely, because of special need or necessity are given special attention, lest he himself hankers for that comfort or think it a trivial thing for the soul to be at rest.

If you can answer "yes" to this litmus question, you are on the right path. If "no"—if instead, you feel like most people feel much of the time: fuzzy-minded (especially in prayer), "heavy," not disposed towards moderation in food intake, lustful, irritable, etc.—, then you need to course-correct. It is as simple as that. Of course, this is not a question to ask yourself every hour. It is, rather, something to take stock of relatively frequently. It is helpful to keep a journal, especially if food is something that is a passion for you. The Holy Fathers have taught, as if with one voice, that the stomach is the gateway to the passions. Watchfulness in this area is, therefore, absolutely essential to spiritual progress. As St. Gregory Palamas once wrote, "[E]ven satiety with cheap foods prevents the cathartic mourning and the godly sorrow in the soul and the compunction which shapes firm repentance for salvation; for without a broken heart it is not possible to enter truly into repentance" (St. Gregory Palamas as a Hagiorite, by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos). I hope this helps. Just remember the "two S's": simplicity and satiety. These "buzzwords," recalled whenever an opportunity to eat presents itself, will keep you in remembrance of the spirit of the Fast and guide you through the gray areas. It will help you to know whether you are keeping the Royal Way or living as a Pharisee in disguise. Your aim is to try at all times, even out of fasting periods, to divorce yourself from an attachment to, and love

of, food. As St. Nicodemus once wrote, "the root of virtually all of life's faults lies in one's inordinate preoccupation with food" (A Handbook).

In closing I should add that proper fasting will likely take years of practice. I myself have a long way to go in this area. We will fall numerous times from the ideal that I have attempted to sketch out here. The important thing is not to focus on the success or failure of your efforts. This is a tactic of the devil. What God wants from us is the struggle. He wants us to "prepare a way for the Lord" in our hearts. And then what we sow, He waters. The increase of Grace that accompanies such plowing up of our heart's fallow ground (using the spade of fasting) is a gift from God and comes when He chooses to send it. This gift should not be our focus, lest we even rise up in anger that God has not given what is "owed to us." All we need do is be faithful in our struggle, endeavor to keep to the path as much as possible, and God will honor it all richly. He will meet us where we are. Do the best you can, confess weekly, and ask yourself often whether you are on the path. In this way your fasting struggles will bear much fruit.

Sincerely in Christ,

P.S. I have appended some helpful quotes from the very important work, *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*, by St. Ignaty Brianchaninov (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1991), pp. 131-135, 262. These quotes are written for novice monks living in the mid-late 19th century. One can easily apply the principles in this book to much of modern living as a lay person:

-- In order to remain in vigilance, it is necessary to guard the freshness and brightness of the mind with all care. The mind becomes darkened from imprudent use of food, drink and sleep, from much talking, from distraction and from worldly cares. Attend to yourselves, said the Lord, be on your guard and take care that your hearts are never weighed down, dulled and depressed by self-indulgence, overeating and drinking, or worldly cares and pleasures, lest that day (the day of Christ's dread judgment, the last day of the world) catch you unawares. For it will spring like a trap upon all who are living on the face of the earth. So watch and pray at all times for the strength to escape or survive all that is going to happen, and to stand before the Son of Man [Luke 21:34-36].... (pp. 131-132)

-- Having guarded ourselves against distractions and worries, let us turn our attention to our body on which mental vigilance is completely dependent. Human bodies differ widely from one another in strength and health. Some by their strength are like copper and iron; others are frail like grass. For this reason everyone should rule his body with great prudence, after exploring his physical powers. For a strong and healthy body, special fasts and vigils are suitable; they make it lighter, and give the mind a special wakefulness. A weak body should be strengthened by food and sleep according to one's physical needs, but on no account to satiety. Satiety is extremely harmful even for a weak body; it weakens it, and makes it susceptible to disease. Wise temperance of the stomach is a door to all the virtues. Restrain the stomach, and you will enter Paradise. But if you please and pamper your stomach, you will hurl yourself over the precipice of bodily impurity, into the fire of wrath and fury, you will coarsen and darken your

mind, and in this way you will ruin your powers of attention and self-control, your sobriety and vigilance.... (pp. 133-134)

-- Just as we must beware of overeating, so too we must beware of excessive temperance or abstinence. Excessive temperance weakens the body, destroys wakefulness, coolness and freshness which are indispensable for vigilance, and which fade and weaken when the physical powers succumb and fail. Said Saint Isaac the Syrian: 'If you force a weak body to labour beyond its powers, you subject your soul to double darkness, and lead it into confusion (and not relief). But if you give a strong body rest and ease and idleness, all the passions dwelling in the soul are intensified. Then, even if the soul has a great desire for good, even the very thought of the good that is desired will be taken from you Measure and time limits in discipline illumine the mind and banish confusion. When the mind is upset by a disorderly or imprudent life, darkness clouds the soul; and with darkness comes disorder and confusion. Peace comes from order; light is born from peace of soul. And from peace, joy fills the mind.' [Mystic Treatises, Chs. 46 and 45]

-- Constant and unfailing vigilance is secured by prudent temperance. Constant vigilance secures a faithful following of the Gospel teaching. The Gospel teaching is the only source of all true, Christian, God-pleasing virtues.... (p. 135)

-- The use of food both in the refectory and in the cells should be regulated by prudence in regard to quantity. Novices should take food almost to fullness, but not to satiety. Fasting, which is so useful for a monk later, in the case of a novice should be moderate. If a novice does not eat outside the refectory, such a fast will be fully sufficient for him. The partaking of food in the refectory almost to fullness is necessary for a novice because he is obliged to do his obediences which are sometimes difficult, and so as not to weaken his bodily strength excessively. For the due weakening of the body, the quality and quantity of the monastic food in the refectory is sufficient. The passions diminish in novices not through violent fasting, but through the confession of sinful thoughts, through labours, and, through shunning free intercourse with others. (p. 262)

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For further reading see *On the Spirit of Gluttony* (Book V from the Institutes of St. John Cassian) and *Fasting and Science: A Study of the Scientific Support and Patristic Foundation for Fasting in the Orthodox Church*, by Dr. Constantine Cavarnos (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1988).