**Fasting in our Orthodox church**

**THE ACCEPTABLE SPIRITUAL FASTING:**

But maybe some would ask the Lord, as it happened at the time of Isaiah the Prophet: “*Why have we fasted, and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted* *our souls and You take no notice?” (Is 58:3).* And the Lord would reply as He did to those and say to them: *“Is it a fast that I have chosen?” (Is 58:5).*

You must know, my brother, that not every fasting is acceptable before God. The Pharisee who used to fast twice a week, was not justified like the tax collector (Lk 18:12,14). The same with fasting that does not have repentance. Likewise, the fasting of the sinners at the time of Jeremiah the Prophet, about whom the Lord said: “*When they fast, I will not hear their cry;* *and when they offer burnt offering, I will not accept them” (Jer 14:11,12). T*he same with the fasting of the hypocrites, who want to appear to men to be fasting (Mt 6:16-18).

**Our advice is to abstain from whatever you desire...**

Remember the saying of the Prophet Daniel about his fasting: “*I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth” (Dan 10:*3) ... I say thatbecause many eat a lot of desirable vegetarian food and enjoy it. Therefore,they do not really feel that they are fasting, and then they do not benefitfrom their fasting, especially if there was a mother or a wife who is expert incooking vegetarian food and makes it more appetizing than ordinary food.Therefore, place before yourself two observations during your fast: thefirst is that you do not ask for specific types of food that you enjoy. Thesecond is that if desirable food is placed before you, do not satisfy your desireand eat from it. Or else take a small amount and leave the rest and controlyourself. Or mix the desirable with the undesirable, so that the desirablewill not taste that good.

**Fasting also has to be linked to repentance.**

Because what is important in spirituality is the pure heart and not just the hungry body. It also makes our fasting acceptable to God and we feel that we benefit from it. And so says the divine inspiration in the Book of Joel: “*Consecrate a fast,* *call a sacred assembly” (Joel 2:15).* Fasting then is a holy period. And how

could it be holy without repentance?! And what we acquire from feelings of repentance during fasting should remain with us.

**Fasting is also accompanied by humility before God.**

And so the Prophet David said: *“I humbled myself with fasting” (Ps 35:13).* And in the fasting of the people of Nineveh, they put on sack cloth and satin ashes (Jon 3). And as the body is crushed by fasting, so the spirit shouldbe crushed. Therefore, fasting is accompanied by prostrations. It is notenough for your body to bend, but also for your spirit to bend. As the ProphetDavid said: *“My soul clings to the dust*” *(Ps 119:25).* He did not only say:“My head clings to the dust” ...

**We need to differentiate between breaking fast and lack of restraint.**

Many controls themselves during the fast, but when it is over and it is feast time, they lose all that they acquired, thinking that breaking a fast means loss of restraint and self-control!! Therefore, the one who takes fasting as one of the spiritual means, keeps in his heart, his soul and his will all that he acquired during the fast, and the benefit continues with him. If fasting helped him to get rid of a bad habit or a specific habit, he does not go back to it even

after he breaks his fast.

**Points of variance with Protestants:**

**the objection concerning fasting in secret**

There are two kinds of worship: individual and communal.

(a) In prayer for example, there is individual prayer; you pray in your room, to your Father who sees in secret. This does not cancel the existence of communal prayer for all the groups of

believers to pray in one spirit, in one soul and in one voice. Examples of such prayers are numerous in the New Testament. One of these examples is the prayer of the believers after the

release of Peter and John from prison: *"So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said..."* (Acts 4: 24).

Of course the Lord's commandment regarding praying in secret (Matt.6: 6) does not apply to such prayer.

(b) Likewise, in charity, there is a charitable deed done in secret as an individual act in which you do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing (Matt.6: 3). But this does

not cancel the general charity collected from everyone, as when King David collected donations to build the Temple. He mentioned in detail how much he contributed, and how much

was contributed by the leaders of the fathers' houses, the leaders of the tribes of Israel, the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and the officers over the king's work (1Chr.29: 3-9).

Another example is when the rich people put their gifts in the Temple treasury and the poor widow put in two very small copper coins (Lk.21: 1,2).

(c) Likewise, in fasting, there is individual fasting practiced in

secret that does not cancel the general fast shared by the whole

community of believers.

**Is communal fasting a Biblical doctrine or not?**

There are numerous examples of communal fasts in the Holy Bible, such as:

**In the old testament**

**(a) The people's fast at the time of Esther** All the people fasted together at the same time for onepurpose, praying for one request of the Lord, and the Lordaccepted their fast and granted them their request (Esth. 4).

**(b) The fast of the people of Nineveh** They all fasted together and not in secret, and the Lord

accepted their fast and forgave them their sins (Jon.3).

**(c) The people's fast at the time of Nehemiah and Ezra** Nehemiah says: *"Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month**the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in*

*sackcloth, and with dust on their heads"* (Neh.9: 1). And Ezra says: "*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 and all our possessions"* (Ezra 8:21).

**(d) The fast at the time of Joel** The Bible says: " *'Now, therefore,’ says the Lord, 'Turn to*

*Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.’... consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders,*

*gather the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room"* (Joel 2: 12-17).

**In the new testament**

1. **The Apostles' fast in the New Testament** When the Lord Jesus Christ was asked why His disciples didnot fast, He replied: *"But the days will come when the**bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will**fast"* (Matt.9: 15). The Apostles did fast together and not in secret, and the Lord accepted their fast. Some examples of the Apostles' fasts: *"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.' Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them...* " (Acts 13: 2,3).
2. **St. Paul fasted for a long time together with all the people on the ship** (Acts 27:21)

**Therefore, communal fasting is acceptable and is a Biblical doctrine.** It is proof of the oneness of soul in worshipand in approaching God, especially if the purpose of the fast is a

matter that concerns the whole community, or if the whole community partakes in the fast, as they do in prayer, in one soul.

**There is no hypocrisy in communal fasting** in communal fasting there is no distinction between oneperson and the other. The level and depth of the fast of eachindividual remains *‘in secret’.* In the New Testament there isnot one single verse that prevents communal fasting.

**Reply to the objection of fasting in set times**

Fasting in set times is also a Biblical doctrine, as the Lord defines in the Book of the Prophet Zechariah: "The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth" (Zech.8: 19). The reason of defining times for fasting may be to regulate communal worship. Occasions of fasts in Christianity have Christian implications: each fast has its own spiritual aim, effect and reason.

Some would say"...let no one judge you" The Apostle did not say: "Let no one judge you in fasts", but he said: "...let no one judge you in food or in drink." By this he meant the unclean foods forbidden to the Jews and the types of food which they considered impure. This reminds us of the vision which St. Peter the Apostle saw in connection with directing Cornelius. The Apostle saw a great sheet in which were all kinds of food and he heard a voice telling him to kill and eat. But Peter said: " ‘Not so, Lord! For 102 I have never eaten anything common or unclean.’ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common' " (Acts 10: 14,15). It was regarding these foods which were considered impure and unclean, that the Apostle Paul said: "...let no one judge you in food or in drink. " For at the beginning of Christianity, the first people who became Christians were Jews who tried to “Judaize” Christianity, that is, to bring into Christianity all the Jewish customs such as unclean food, purification, keeping the Sabbath, moon festivals, celebrations of the beginning of months and Jewish feasts (such as the Passover, the Unleavened Bread, the Trumpets, the Tents and the Atonement Day). St. Paul wanted to resist the Judaization of Christianity. That is why he said: "Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come" (Col.2: 16,17). Hence this was not an occasion of talking about fasting, but it was an occasion of talking about the Jewish customs which the converted Jews wanted to bring into Christianity.

**the subject of vegetarian food**

1. Firstly, we would like to say that fasting in our Church is not merely eating vegetarian food, but it is abstaining from eating for a certain time followed by eating vegetarian food (food free from animal fat).
2. Vegetarian food was the food which God presented to Adam and Eve in Paradise (Gen.1: 29) and also after the sin (Gen.3: 18). All animals were fed on vegetarian food, namely grass (Gen. 1: 30). 103
3. The Holy Bible did not allow the eating of meat until after Noah's Ark (Gen.9: 3) when the world had degraded to the extent that made God send the Flood.
4. When God led His people in the Wilderness of Sinai, He offered them vegetarian food, that is, manna (Num.11: 7,8). He did not allow them to eat meat (quails) until after their wailing, groaning and the degradation of their spirits. When God gave them meat He struck them with a severe plague which caused the death of many of them (Num.11: 33). The place where they were buried was named ‘Kibroth Hattaavah’ (which means ‘Graves of Craving’) because they had craved to eat meat.
5. We notice that vegetarian food was the food which Daniel and the three youths ate. The Lord blessed their food and their health was better than all the servants of the king (Dan.1: 12,15). The reasons for using vegetarian food are that it is light food which does not stimulate the bodily desires and it was the original food which God presented to man.

**the objection concerning abstaining from certain foods**

The verse in the Holy Bible on which our Protestant brethren depend does not speak about Church discipline, but says: "...some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons... forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving" (ITim.4: 1-3). Probably the people whom St. Paul is referring to are the Manichaeans and the Mandaeans who forbade marriage, meat and wine. The Church excommunicated them and condemned all their heretic publications.

 The Church does not forbid the eating of meat and similar foods but abstains from eating them during fasts as an ascetic practice and not because they are unclean food. This is proved by the fact that people eat these foods when they break their fast. Daniel ate pulse only and abstained from all other foods, yet he was not condemned according to the aforementioned verses. Likewise, John the Baptist abstained from certain foods and so do all ascetics everywhere and in every age.

Asceticism for a certain time is one thing and forbidding food is another.

**We have to say an important remaining point.** Church authority in organizing worship The Church has regulated the fasts and has laid down for them spiritual rules and set times based on spiritual grounds. Thus, the Church maintains the fasts and they have remained essential and indispensable spiritual practices. The Church has the right, or rather the obligation, to organize for the benefit of her members various spiritual practices so they may worship the Lord together in one spirit. Here the Church implement’s Lord's commission to her leaders: "...whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt.18: 18). Thus, Church discipline is biblically based.

Our Protestant brethren, in adopting an individualistic and congregational approach, made their congregation lose the benefits of fasting, which is regrettably, almost extinct from the evangelical churches. Discipline is generally useful for the individual; it does not hinder his freedom but rather regulates its usage.

**Sources:**

1. ***The Book of (Spiritual Means) By H.H. Pope Shenouda III***
2. ***The Book of (Comparative Theology) By H.H. Pope Shenouda III,***