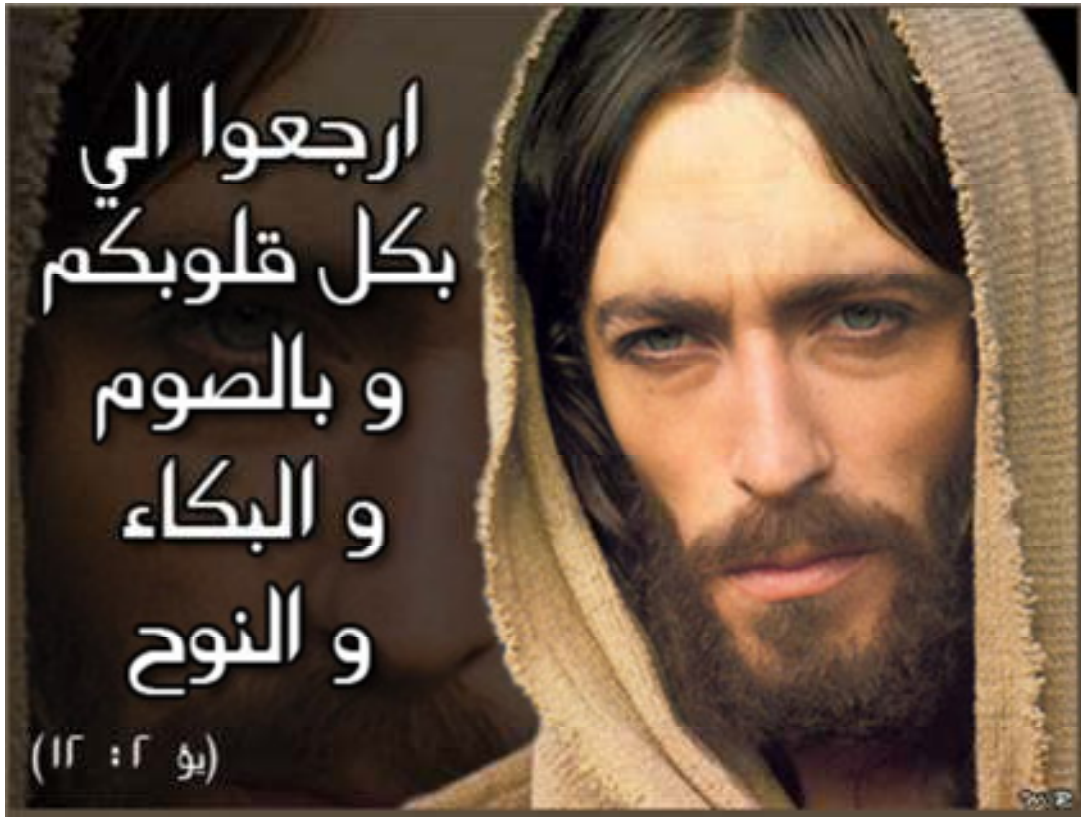


The Power of Fasting



The power of fasting as it relates to prayer is the spiritual atomic bomb that our Lord has given us to destroy the strongholds of evil and usher in a great revival and spiritual harvest around the world.

The Copts have seasons of fasting like no other Christian community because they fast for over 210 days out of a 365 day year. When fasting, the Copts can eat no animal products, including poultry, meat, fish, eggs, and milk. Also, no food or drink is allowed between the hours of sunrise and sunset. Lent, known as “the Great Fast,” is the main fast of the Copts. Lent starts with a pre-Lent fast of one week, followed by a forty day fast commemorating Christ’s fasting on the mountain, followed by the holy week of the Coptic calendar called Pascha. Lent climaxes with Good Friday and ends with Easter.

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The season of Lent is 40 days long. 40 is the Biblical number for a time of preparation and cleansing. It rained for 40 days and nights during the flood while God cleansed the world. The children of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years while God cleansed them of their rebellion. Christ fasted for 40 days to prepare for his ministry as he was tempted in the wilderness. The reason Sundays are excluded when counting these 40 days is that each Sunday is a celebration of the day of the week on which Christ rose. So each Sunday is a little Easter

Lent starts with a pre-Lent fast of one week, followed by a forty day fast commemorating Christ’s fasting on the mountain, followed by the holy week of the Coptic calendar called Pascha. The word Pascha is the Hebrew word which means Passover. As Orthodox Christians we use Pascha instead of Easter. Pascha is used because it describes what Christ did for us. Just as the blood of the sacrificed lamb kept the angel of death away from the Hebrews (Ex. 12: 3-49) so it is Christ's sacrifice as the New Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7) and His blood allows us to "pass from death to life." (John 5: 24)

Lent climaxes with Good Friday and ends with Easter.

One of the first things we consider when planning a trip is where we are going — our destination. Great Lent is a very special trip. It is a holy pilgrimage which, if understood and planned properly, can lead us to the very mystery of God's mighty act of sacrificial love and glory.

Great Lent takes us to Calvary where the Lord Jesus redeemed us from the bondage of sin, death, and Satan himself. But our destination is the lord's glorious Resurrection by which everlasting life in God's Kingdom has been assured to those who in faith and love follow Him. The significance of this spiritual pilgrimage is that it affords us the

opportunity to renew experientially both the death and the newness of life that the Lord's saving act makes real for our lives in Baptism. People who take trips to distant places usually do so because they can afford it. The People of God who participate in Great Lent do so because they know that they cannot afford not to.

There are three indispensable means of participating in Great Lent. They are fasting, prayer and Spiritual vigilance which are an attitude of alertness and eager expectation both for the coming of the Lord and the averting of worldly distractions which would divert our attention from Him.

When Jesus had fasted forty days and forty nights in the wilderness in preparation for His saving ministry, we are told that the devil tempted Him to change stones into loaves of bread. The Lord rebuked the tempter with the words, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:14; Deuteronomy 8:3). In this way Jesus succeeded where Adam had failed (Genesis 3:1-6). His answer to Satan is a trenchant affirmation that to live our lives as though God did not exist, that is, "by bread alone," is to live according to a demonic lie.

Fasting is an essential element of the Christian Life. Christ fasted and taught men to fast. Blessed fasting is done in secret). It has as its goal the purification of our lives, the liberation of our souls and bodies from sin, the strengthening of our human powers of love for God and man, the enlightening of our entire being for communion with the Blessed Trinity.

Let us fast with a fast pleasing to the Lord. This is the true fast: the casting off of evil, the bridling of the tongue, the cutting off of anger, the cessation of lusts, evil talking, lies and cursing. The stopping of these is the fast true and acceptable.

Genuine fasting which subjects our flesh and its passions to the will of a humbled and contrite spirit is perhaps the most effective means to grow in God's grace (see Romans 8:1-17). It opens our innermost self to the

promptings of the Holy Spirit Who yearns to make our soul His temple. It is this possibility for growth in Christ-likeness through fasting that should fire our self-discipline according to the canons and rules of the Church. Adherence to dietary prescriptions alone easily deteriorates as a negative perception of Lent which does violence both to the intent and purpose of fasting. The point is to give up a measure of our dependence upon the material world in order to experience personally our hunger for God.

The days of fasting are days of repentance and contrition. At the same time, they are periods of joy and cheer as believers experience victory and power in their innermost self. Fasting does not imply fatigue, restraint, or irritation, but rather it inspires joy and inward gladness with the Lord reigning within the heart... This is the experience of the Coptic Church particularly during the Holy Week. At that time believers practice asceticism more than at any other time of fasting. The signs of real spiritual joy and consolation filling the heart are so clearly evident then.

Pope Athanasius of Alexandria has recorded this experience. He says: [Let us not fulfill these days like those that mourn, but by enjoying spiritual food, let us try to silence our fleshly lusts. For by these means we shall have strength to overcome our adversaries, like blessed Judith (13:8), when having first exercised herself in fasting and prayers, she overcame the enemies, and killed Olophernes

How you begin and conduct your fast will largely determine your success. You have to plan to make your time with the Lord more meaningful and spiritually rewarding.

Set Your Objective

Why are you fasting? Is it just as a tradition of the church or Is it for spiritual renewal, for guidance, for healing, for the resolution of problems, for special grace to handle a difficult situation? Ask the Holy

Spirit to clarify His leading and objectives for your prayer fast. This will enable you to pray more specifically and strategically.

Through fasting and prayer we humble ourselves before God so the Holy Spirit will stir our souls, awaken our churches, and heal our land according to 2 Chronicles 7:14. Make this a priority in your fasting.

Prepare Yourself Spiritually

The very foundation of fasting and prayer is repentance. Unconfessed sin will hinder your prayers. Here are several things you can do to prepare your heart:

Ask God to help you make a comprehensive list of your sins.

Confess every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance and accept God's forgiveness. (1John 1:9)

Seek forgiveness from all whom you have offended, and forgive all who have hurt you. (Mark 11:25, Luke 11:4, 17:3, 4)

Ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit according to His command in Ephesians 5:18 and His promise in 1 John 5: 14, 15.

Surrender your life fully to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Master; refuse to obey your worldly nature (Romans 12:1, 2).

Meditate on the attributes of God, His love, sovereignty, power, wisdom, faithfulness, grace, compassion, and others (Psalm 48:9,10, 103: 1-8, 11:13).

Do not underestimate spiritual opposition. Satan sometimes intensifies the natural battle between body and spirit (Galatians 5:16,17).

Prepare Yourself Physically

Fasting requires reasonable precautions. Consult your physician first, especially if you take prescription medication or have a chronic ailment. Some persons should never fast without professional supervision.

Physical preparation makes the drastic change in your eating routine a little easier so that you can turn your full attention to the Lord in prayer.

Do not rush into your fast.

Prepare your body. Eat smaller meals before starting a fast. Avoid high-fat and sugary foods.

Eat raw fruit and vegetables for two days before starting a fast.

"Fasting is a gift: When we realize the benefits of fasting, we find that it is a blessing from God. Fasting precedes every grace and service: Through fasting, we prepare ourselves to receive every blessing that God offers us. Feasts bear for us certain blessings. This is why fasting precedes every feast. Communion bears for us a special blessing that is why we fast to be ready for it. The faithful, who fast, gain the blessings of the Holy Spirit during the Church sacraments. The unwise man has confidence in his power and intelligence but he who is aware of his weakness appeals to God through fasting when in trouble. "For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now I will arise," says the Lord; "I will set him in the safety for which he yearns." (Ps 12:5). Fasting is a time to let God know of our every problem. It is a period for the contrite heart to lament and for God to hear."

Pope Shenouda

If you sincerely humble yourself before the Lord, repent, pray, and seek God's face; if you consistently meditate on His Word, you will experience a heightened awareness of His presence (John 14:21). The Lord will give you fresh, new spiritual insights. Your confidence and faith in God will be strengthened. You will feel mentally, spiritually, and physically refreshed. You will see answers to your prayers.