

REFLECTIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT LENT



Dear brothers and sisters!

Every task we begin has a certain goal: if we leave our home, then we intend to get somewhere; if we sow, then we hope for a good harvest; if we work, then we expect the fruits of our labor.

The Great Lent upon which we are embarking now is not an exception, as it also has its purpose. The goal, achieved through the restraint of our soul and body, is the bettering of our spiritual life and communion with God through prayer and the Holy Mysteries of confession and Holy Communion.

When we discuss fasting, the first and most common topic is the limitation of food. Indeed, church tradition directs us to abstain from animal products, reduce the amount of food we consume, and choose simple, unpretentious foods during this Lenten period. By restraining ourselves voluntarily, we become accustomed to bodily self-restraint, learn to be content with the simple and necessary, and prevent grandiosity and excess from taking over our hearts.

“Is it a sin that I eat meat?” “Does God look at my plate?” Questions such as these can be heard from critics of fasting. Certainly, what we eat is not in itself a sin. But if for a time we cannot voluntarily restrain ourselves from food that we find delicious and familiar, how can we restrain ourselves from truly sinful habits? Bodily restraint helps us to restrain our passions, heals our willpower, and teaches us that the soul is not the servant of the body, but that it is the soul that directs the body. We eat to live, not live to eat, and fasting helps us understand which is the first and greater, and which comes second. Neither God nor the Church need us to fast, but it is imperative for ourselves, so that, by constraining ourselves, we become accustomed to what is better, that we set the spiritual up above the material.

Of course, not everyone is able to fast to the same extent; some are burdened with illness or hard labor, some depend on food in circumstances beyond their control, without having any choice about what is put on their table. A number of objective reasons allow for mitigation of the strict rules of fasting. However, where such circumstances exist, it is best not to reject fasting altogether, but to consult our parish priest or other clergy to find a way of fulfilling the rules of fasting, which

on the one hand will distinguish between the days of the Holy Quadragesima (40 day fast) from ordinary days, and on the other hand will not do harm to health.

We have explained that fasting is not solely and primarily a time of dieting, but is a period of integral labor of a person over himself; such labor for Christians is impossible without the spiritual component of fasting – without prayer, repentance and communion in the Holy Body and Blood of Christ. Even if the fasting rules for food are not followed equally by all, no one should reject the spiritual component of the fast.

Not one of us can say that we are sinless, that we do not need to repent and be forgiven of our sins. Also, no Christian can deny the need for both private and communal prayer during church worship. In the bustle of everyday life, we often forget about these important needs of our souls, so this time of fasting provides a helpful chance and encouragement to pause, calm ourselves, and redirect our focus from the earthly and temporal to the heavenly and eternal.

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). These words of the Savior encourage us to pay more attention to spiritual reading at the time of fasting. Holy Scripture, the teachings of the holy fathers and teachers of the Church, the lives of the saints, the instruction of the ascetics, and other spiritual and wholesome books and publications should replace for us, at least in some part, our daily attention to television, websites, and social networks. The former brings peace to the soul and provides helps and instructive examples for us to imitate, while the latter often causes concern, provokes controversy and condemnation, and leads to sin.

There is no doubt that so much more can be said about fasting, but I wish to limit myself to these considerations. Those who wish to know more can find answers to other questions about fasting in published words or by speaking with elders in the faith.

I wish you all a beneficial and fruitful, physical and spiritual fast.

May God bless us to journey properly through the path of the Holy Quadragesima!

With prayer for all of you –

**Epiphaniy
Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine**

***March 11, 2019, Monday,
the first week of the Great Lent**