

## The Significance of Fasting and Its Observance Today

### I. History

#### 1. Short version

The document on fasting in its initial form was accepted at the Third Pre-Council Pan-Orthodox Conference in 1986. However, the debate over this document began at the Second Conference in 1982. The title of the document which was drafted by the First Pre-Council Pan-Orthodox Conference was: *Adaptation of Rules of Fasting to Contemporary Conditions*. The preparations of this document for the needs of the Commission were delegated to the Church in Serbia. As such, the title of the document indicated and announced great changes in the Orthodox fasting tradition. The suggestions and proposals of certain local Churches called for shortening the Nativity Fast, eliminating the Apostles' Fast and a less strict approach to Great Lent<sup>15</sup>. It turned out that the document prepared for the needs of the Commission did not include such adaptations to contemporary conditions, but did make reference to the traditional periods of fasting and drew attention to the importance and need for fasting in the life of Christians. For this reason, part of the Conference's participants believed that the content of the document prepared did not reflect its title or solve the problem<sup>16</sup>. The discussion related to fasting indicated two tendencies on the part of the Conference's participants: 1) reformatory, which emphasised the need for change in the tradition and practice of fasting and 2) traditional, which demonstrated the need for maintaining the fasts as an important element of the life and spirituality of the Orthodox Church<sup>17</sup>. The traditional voices prevailed, thus the Conference decided to change the title of the document in order to reflect the actual content: *The Importance of Fasting and its Observance Today*.

However, the document turned out to be a well-balanced text and more pastoral in nature than disciplinary. The authors of the text avoided expressions that would sanction people who chose not to fast (Ap. 69). It was also noted that local Churches should take their local geographical conditions into consideration when indicating the products that can be consumed during the fast.

The Special Commission, which analysed and completed the document in 2015, found that document was good enough and introduced only small changes.

#### 2. Extended version. The Topic of Fasting During the Panorthodox Meetings in the XXth Century

During the XXth century an ample process of dialogue was initiated between the representatives of all the Orthodox Churches, intended to provide answers to the issues of contemporary Christian life and to prepare the meeting of a Holy and Great Synod of Orthodoxy. Right from the start, among the topics approached by the representatives of the churches was also the topic of fasting, since in the local Churches had appeared different practices related to fasting, that affected the canonical unity of the Orthodox Church.

Right from panorthodox Congress of Constantinople<sup>14</sup> on May 10 – June 8, 1923 – together with other stringent issues of Orthodoxy, such as the issue of calendar, the topic of fasting was also tackled.

*The topic of fasting was tackled during the fifth topic, the last point (the eighth). Thus, the representatives of the Churches decided on June 5, 1923: In terms of fasting, every ecclesiastical authority can take its lead from apostolic 69 Canon 69, that stipulates: „If a bishop, or priest, or deacon, or subdeacon, or lecturer, or musician, does not fast on Wednesday and on Friday during the Holy Fasting of 40 days before Pascha, he is to be defrocked, except for the cases when he is hindered from these due to bodily weaknesses; if he is lay, to be excommunicated”. Yet for emergency situations the “dispensation” will be respected, where the comment of Balsamon to this canon should*

*be kept as a guide: „In terms of this canon, we must note that there is only one period of fasting that lasts for forty days, because if other such periods existed, the canon would remind us of these ones. Still we are not ashamed to fast on other fasting days, respectively before the Holy Apostles, before the Dormition of the Mother of God and before the Birth of our Lord”*

On May 1, 1926, the Ecumenic Patriarch Basil the III<sup>rd</sup> (1925-1929) addressed an encyclic to all the Hierarchs of the Orthodox Churches, by which their opinion was required in relation to the perspective of organizing some preparatory conferences and of a ProSynod, made up of the representatives of all the local Churches, that should be preliminary to the future Panorthodox Synod<sup>16</sup>, and among the topics mentioned by some local Churches is also the one of fasting.

If in 1948, at the Orthodox Conference in Moscow, the topic of fasting was not debated by the representatives of the Orthodox Churches<sup>19</sup>, this topic was tackled again at the first Panorthodox Conference held on the island of Rhodos, between September 24 – October 1, 1961.

The Panorthodox Conference on Rhodos adopted a catalogue of synthesized topics organized in 8 groups, each topic having in its turn, more sub-topics. At group 3, point 5 reference is made to fasting: *The rematching of provisions related to the ecclesiastical fasts to the needs of the contemporary era.*

The fact that the topic of fasting was also tackled during the fourth Panorthodox Conference in 1968 shows that this topic represented a constant preoccupation of the representatives of the Orthodox Churches during the interorthodox meetings. The fourth Conference was called in order to simplify the vast theme that was set in 1961.

During the Conference it was decided to give up on the plan of a Pro- Synod, and instead to organize a series of Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conferences, that were to adopt the texts related to the topics suggested starting with 1961, texts that were to be presented directly to the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. The choice of some topics adopted on Rhodos in 1961 was also decided and their distribution for study to the local Churches, as follows:

1. The origins of divine revelation (the Ecumenic Patriarchy);
2. The participation of laymen in the life of the Church (the Bulgarian Church);
3. **The rematching of ecclesiastical precepts related to fasting (the Serbian Church);**
4. Obstacles in marriage (the Russian Church and the Greek Church);
5. The topic of calendar and of celebration in common of the Holy Pascha (the Russian Church and the Greek Church);
6. The ecclesiastical dispensation (the Romanian Orthodox Church).<sup>24</sup>

The topic of fasting was taken up during the second Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference, that was held between September 3-12, 1982, at the Orthodox Center in Chambésy, bearing the title: *the Adaptation of the ecclesiastical order related to fasting, according to the requirements of the current era*, being the third item on the agenda.

the second Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference decided the following:

- deliberating on this topic with all attention and care;
- considering, still, that the preparation made up to the present as being insufficient and not allowing Orthodoxy to express unanimously on this point;
- in order to avoid a fast resolution and in order to provide the autocephalous
- Orthodox Churches the opportunity of preparation compared to the continuation of the tradition of the people of God, the II<sup>nd</sup> Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference:
- Invited the local Orthodox Churches to send to the Secretariat, for the preparation of the Holy and Great Synod, their observations on this topic, based on the file already prepared;
- Put off the issue in order to be reconsidered at a further Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference, following the previous study by the preparatory interorthodox Commission;
- Pronounced that the old practice remain in force until the Holy and Great Synod shall examine the issue based on the proposals of a Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference in charge of study”

As regards fasting, we note that the Metropolitan Antonie of Ardeal, as leader of the Romanian delegation, suggested that the title of this topic not speak about “the rematching of the rules of Fasting”, since this would “scandalize our faithful, and it could be considered that we are changing the canonic rules in terms of Fasting”, but to speak about the importance of Fasting “and about its practice nowadays”<sup>34</sup>. Following preliminary discussions on the four topics, four working commissions were settled, one for each topic, in charge with drawing up the final texts, in order to be adopted during the conference. The representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church who were part of the commission that analyzed the importance of fasting was patriarchal vicar bishop Nifon Ploieşteanul and priest professor Dumitru Popescu, as advisor. Following the preparation of the four texts related to each topic put on the agenda, the members of the Conference adopted them unanimously, following their being presented to the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. We state that the text, according to the recommendation of Antonie Metropolitan, was not adopted with the title the *Rematching of ecclesiastic provisions related to fasting*, but with the title *The Importance of fasting and its keeping nowadays*.

Subsequently, the document that was drawn up and completed at the third Panorthodox Pre-Synodal Conference, in 1986, from the Orthodox Center in Chambésy, was approved by the representatives of all the Orthodox Churches, being on the agenda.

## II. Content Analysis

(RASTKO JOVIC – Faculty of Orthodox Theology)

- A. **Chapter 1:** Unfortunately, a problem arises immediately where in chapter 1 the document states that “Fasting is a divine commandment (Gen 2:16- 17). According to Basil the Great, fasting is as old as humanity itself; it was prescribed in paradise (On Fasting, 1, 3. PG 31, 168A).” Carefully reading biblical text, God in paradise commands “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (Gen 2:16-17). These words in Paradise are not in accord with “not eating anything” which true fasting implies. If fasting was self-evident in the divine commandment, Jews would probably fast. On the contrary, for Jews fasting was never obligatory for the whole community but rather a

reaction of individuals, a reaction on some of the troubles or problems in their lives. After return from exile from Babylonian captivity, a one day fast was introduced on Yom Kippur, i.e. the Day of Atonement. So, even the first chapter of the document is more than problematic in its definition that fasting has been a divine commandment. We should be reminded that in all three Gospels, the accusation against Apostles has been that they do not fast. (Mt. 9:14, Mk. 2:18, Lk. 5:33). Christ is fasting for 40 days, but only once in His life, similarly like many other fathers and prophets from the Old Testament. In other words, the argument that fasting is a divine commandment is more doubtful than convincing.

- B. **Chapter 6:** In chapter 6, the document on fasting recognizes fasting periods that have been developed throughout the centuries, and explains whether they exist in the canonical tradition. The Document says, "Following the example of the Holy Fathers, the Church preserves today, as she did in the past, the holy apostolic precepts, synodal canons, and sacred traditions, always advancing the holy fasts as the perfect ascetic path for the faithful leading to spiritual perfection and salvation...." Although in previous chapters, the document accentuates the social implications of fasting, in this chapter, fasting becomes solely seen as an ascetic path towards perfection. Are we lacking in substantial arguments about how fasting could be understood as a path to salvation? It is not unnecessary to remember that in early Christianity, the way to salvation was celebrated through the feast of eating and drinking and not fasting. Even the remembrance of Christ's death and the Second Coming were always connected with food, eating and drinking.
- C. **Chapter 8:** "It is a fact that many faithful today do not observe all the prescriptions of fasting, whether due to faint-heartedness or their living conditions, whatever these may be. However, all these instances where the sacred prescriptions of fasting are loosened, either in general or in particular instances, should be treated by the Church with pastoral care, "for God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek 33:11), without, however, ignoring the value of the fast."
- D. As we notice immediately, the beginning of chapter 8 recognizes that "*many faithful* today do not observe all the prescriptions of fasting."<sup>15</sup> It is interesting that this passage is almost identical as it is in the document from 1986 which makes things more grotesque.<sup>16</sup> Thirty years passed, from 1986-2016, when the Church identified the problem where "many faithful do not observe fasting" and nothing was changed in the document.<sup>17</sup> The "new document" does not offer any substantial solutions to resolve the issue – except to repeat the same conclusions.
- E. We could even say that the document from 1986 is more liberal in its approach: "All these are said, however, with the purpose of not weakening in any way the holy institution of fasting. This merciful dispensation should be exercised by the Church with all measure, in any case, with much lenience in the case of those fasts where there is not always a uniform practice and tradition."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the document at least recognizes that not all fasting periods have the same authority. The document from the Pan- Orthodox meeting in 1923<sup>19</sup> shared the same points like the one from 1986,<sup>20</sup> which cannot be said for the document that has been adopted in 2016.
- F. **Chapter 9:** Pastoral care of the church and the dispensations mentioned in chapter 8 concerning fasting and those who do not follow fasting sounds obscure in the context of making fasting periods obligatory for all in the first place! That is explicitly stated throughout **chapter 9:** "However, the totality of the Church's faithful *must observe the holy fasts.*"<sup>21</sup> Making fasting obligatory, we produce as a consequence an orthodox identity that is inconceivable without a fasting practice. Unfortunately, food became our identity marker.

We may hope that by the end of chapter 8 of the document, we can find a more practical solution, but that is not the case: “it is left to the discretion of the local Orthodox Churches to determine how to exercise philanthropic *oikonomia* and empathy, relieving in these special cases the “burden” of the holy fast.” It is our hope that local orthodox churches at some point will try, even unilaterally, to change fasting periods and length changing this practice into private piety and not obligatory for all.