

The Rule of the Ascetic Fast of Great Lent

Urgent Note: *The following reflect the strict rules of fasting in the Greek tradition as set forth by His Eminence, Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) in The Lenten Triodion. This represents a general outline that comes primarily from the monastic tradition, though different monastic communities may follow slightly different customs.*

Those who have chronic health issues or are pregnant should consult with their physician prior to undertaking any fast. The fast is designed to enhance health, not hinder it. We must undertake the fast in consultation with our spiritual father. Therefore, outside the monastic environment, parishioners should consult with their parish priest/spiritual father to determine the appropriate means of fasting. The rule set forth below reflects the highest standard and should not be attempted by those who have no or little experience with fasting.

Finally, fasting means nothing without the purification of the heart (self-examination, confession) and prayer. In fact, these take priority, for while not all are able to fast, all are called to pray and repent. Fasting without prayer (including participation in liturgical/corporate prayer with the Church), sacramental participation and repentance is useless.

While in the Greek Orthodox tradition, confession prior to every reception of Holy Communion is normally not required (if participating regularly in the life of the Church and the Holy Sacraments), in some Orthodox traditions it is normative and expected. If attending other Orthodox parishes, please be sensitive to this tradition. Of course, Holy Confession is a normative element of our liturgical life in the Church and cannot be neglected. Great Lent is an appropriate time to make an appointment with your parish priest for this purpose.

During Great Lent, there are restrictions on the number of meals taken daily and the types of foods eaten. There is no restriction on the quantity of food taken, although the Fathers suggest leaving the table prior to satiety (feeling full).

The following restrictions apply during the various times of the Lenten Season:

Xerophagy: Is the style of eating that may take place on certain days during Great Lent. It signifies “dry eating” meaning without blood (from meats and fish), animal products (dairy, eggs, etc.) oil or alcoholic beverages including cooking wine. All vegetables, tubers (potatoes, carrots, etc.), fruits, grains, nuts and honey are allowed and if a meal is cooked, it is simply cooked in water with salt. Many breads due to their ingredients are prohibited, but risen bread (with yeast) is often allowed if not prepared with egg or other dairy products. Shellfish are allowed, but should be eaten in moderation. Olives, not olive oil, are permitted. Corn and vegetable oil is permitted, although it should be avoided when possible, especially as a substitute for olive oil.

Weeks of Preparation: Three weeks before Great Lent (the week of the Publican and the Pharisee), no fasting is permitted at all except for the brief fast the day of receiving Holy Communion (basically, in the morning before the Divine Liturgy). The week following the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, we fast on Wednesday and Friday as normal. The week following the Sunday of Judgment (Meatfare), we refrain from all meat and meat products, but regular fish, dairy, wine and oil are permitted everyday (except before receiving Holy Communion). The following Sunday (Cheesefare) is the final day before the start of the Great Lenten Fast.

The First Week of Great Lent

There are only two prescribed meals the entire first week, following Presanctified Liturgy on Wednesday and Friday. In theory, this means the evening meal.

Clean Monday:

Strictly speaking, no meals and bodily intake including water (the inexperienced should take care to not dehydrate). Clean Monday should at least be marked by a complete fast with the exception if necessary of water, plain tea (or black coffee) or fruit juices.

Clean Tuesday, Thursday:

As Clean Monday, but bread may be allowed if necessary. However, no “cooked” meals.

Clean Wednesday, Friday:

One meal (*xerophagy*) is prescribed after services in the evening. Please note: It is considered normative to receive Holy Communion at each Presanctified Divine Liturgy and the Divine Liturgies of Saturday and Sundays. No food should be taken prior to Holy Communion on the day. One should refrain even from water several hours prior. Those on regimens for reasons of health should follow the instructions of their physician and spiritual father. If necessary, one may partake of a light meal in the morning if the Presanctified Divine Liturgy is to be held in the evening, but then no other intake until after receiving Holy Communion.

Saturday and Sunday:

Throughout Lent, Saturday and Sunday are days when wine and olive oil (as well as other oils) are permitted. Likewise, two meals a day are permitted, in the middle of the day and in the evening after Vespers (approx. 6:00 p.m.)

The 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th & 6th Weeks of Great Lent

Monday through Friday:

One meal a day (in the evening after Vespers or Presanctified) is the standard norm, although some Fathers allow two meals on Tuesday and Thursday. *Xerophagy* is prescribed for all weekdays.

Saturday/Sunday: As in the first week.

The following days, if they fall in the week and there is a Church service, are exceptions on which alcohol (basically wine) and oil are permitted, assuming one is attending services:

March 9: The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste
March 24: Forefeast of the Annunciation
March 26: The Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel

Likewise, on the Wednesday evening prior and Thursday of the Great Canon and the Friday/Saturday of the Akathist Hymn, wine and oil are permitted.

Regular fish is only allowed on March 25 (Annunciation) and the Sunday of Palms. In most traditions, wine and oil are permitted on the Saturday of Lazaros, the day prior to Palm Sunday.

Holy Week

Holy Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday:

One meal a day is allowed, but otherwise as the first week of Lent if possible. A strict fast is called for before receiving the Holy Mysteries (Holy Communion and the Anointing of Holy Unction).

Holy Thursday:

Wine and oil permitted following Divine Liturgy, but only one meal.

Holy Friday:

No meals. Total fast if possible, otherwise bread and water after Vespers and the "Taking Down from the Cross." Vespers marks the beginning of Holy Saturday, a day of complete and strictest fasting.

Holy Saturday:

The strictest fast of the year. No intake. Now, after Vespers (normally held in the morning), since the celebration of the Resurrection has begun, six figs, one piece of bread, and a small cup of wine may be consumed. After receiving Holy Communion following the Matins (*Orthros*) of the Resurrection, all foods are permitted.

Pascha

No fasting permitted until after Thomas Sunday/ Antipascha (the next Sunday). Holy Communion can be received each day offered with no fast except in the morning prior. However, afterward all foods permitted. Following Thomas Sunday, we return to our normal fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays until the Leave-taking of Pascha (the Wednesday before the Ascension). In some traditions, the 40 days after Pascha include "relaxed" fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, meaning we only abstain from meat on those days while wine, oil and dairy are permitted. Like Pascha, there is no fasting permitted on any day between Pentecost Sunday and the Sunday of All Saints.