

PHILIP'S FAST: Me... Fast?!?

By Hieromonk Maximos of the Holy Resurrection Monastery

I know, I know. What kind of crazy religion asks you to fast for six weeks before Christmas? Why, with all the parties that we have to go to, all the presents to buy, the family to deal with, the crises to fend off, the hurt feelings to smooth over, why should the Church give us one more thing to worry about. Isn't life hard enough without making us jump through one more stupid hoop? Let me offer a different perspective. I want you to think about the possibility that the invitation to fast in preparation for Christmas may offer you the best chance for that new perspective on life, one that shows you where the real craziness lies, and the real sanity. I came to the United States in 1994. I realized that year, in my very first American Christmas, that among its many amazing characteristics was the way this country could essentially shut down for what it calls the "holidays." In other words, from Thanksgiving to New Years—for one tenth of the year—much of the civic, political and economic life of the country enters a kind of suspended animation. Or perhaps it's better to say that, while one aspect of the consumption machine goes into low gear, another leaps into overdrive. Wall Street may go to sleep, along with vast enterprises as diverse as colleges and schools, manufacturers, government and media, but Main Street retail kicks into frenzy. The stores, to use what is only barely a metaphor, really do "come to life." They come to life, but do we? On the contrary, it seems to me that at least for a time, a part of us dies. For two months most of us stop paying much attention to the news. Work gets shuffled off to the New Year. Our lives are reduced to the only real labor permitted during these "holidays." We get down to the serious business of Indulgence. And for many this work turns out to be the hardest they do each year. No wonder so many people curse these "holidays." The reality is that for these months many of us are forced to disengage from our lives. The world moves on, with its joys and its sorrows, its wars and violence, its hopes and fears. It moves on, but our society demands that we ignore all of it in order to feed the consumerist beast. Surely this is the real insanity: the world needs our attention. I'm certainly speaking here of the world of our immediate surroundings, our families, communities and churches. But I also mean the wider world, the nation, the planet, the poor, the sick, the homeless, the sad. All of these worlds need attention. They need it very badly, but we are required by an implacable social and economic norm to ignore them all. At all costs we must remember that this is the time for holiday "cheer." The demands and rituals of the secular "holidays" show so many of just how badly damaged our relationships really are, but offers no means to heal them. We are reminded of the poverty of the many on which the prosperity of a few perilously sits, with no offer of a means of escape from this imbalance. It's no wonder that domestic violence peaks during this time, that people lash out as reality comes crashing through the plate glass of pretence that our customs, our media, our own traditions teach us to build as barriers against the real world. But... imagine that we Christians lived differently. Imagine what would happen if we Christians spent the Nativity season becoming more deeply attached to reality rather than trying to escape it by indulging artificial desires? What if, instead of running away from the world we spent this time loving the world more deeply? What if we spent this time, not disengaged, but vastly more engaged as creatures within this astonishing creation? The strangest criticism I have ever heard of fasting is that it is a form of "denying the world." On the contrary, fasting is a way of being joined much more intimately to the world. When we fast we experience the world in a new way. That's the whole point! When we fast it is impossible to take the world for granted. We allow the world to hurt us, gently of course, but firmly. It presses in on us, it insists on its truth, its presence, its needs, its intimate connection with our bodies and our minds. When we fast perhaps we can begin—for the first time?—to see the world as God sees it: as beautiful in itself, holy, sacred. When we fast, for Christ's sake, every mouthful of food is made consecrated, sacramental. Yes, fasting can be done badly. But when it is done well, as the Lord commands us, with bright faces and with anointed heads (see

Matthew 6:16), fasting makes us thankful, connected, free, joyful. It helps us to love. Imagine what could happen if Christians spent the Nativity season loving the world as God does, that same God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Just imagine how different everything would be if we lived as though that love were something real, more real than the faked smiles and forced hypocrisy of holiday indulgence. Imagine, in other words, what would happen if we Christians began to see the world as something lovable, far too lovable to be exploited for a few moment's enjoyment, to be used up and thrown away like wrapping paper enclosing the briefest of pleasures. The world says, "party!" but doesn't really seem to know why. The Church also wants us to enjoy these holy days, but goes further than the world. By offering us the gift of fasting, the Church actually gives us both a means and a reason to really—and I mean really—enjoy ourselves. Thank God for our crazy religion! Thank God for the Nativity Fast.

When You Fast: Nativity Fast Traditions for Byzantine Greek Catholics

The Byzantine Greek Catholic Church invites all to participate more fully in the central mysteries of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through her calendar of feasts and fasts.

The feast of the Nativity of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ (Christmas, December 25) is one of the great feasts of the Church year, celebrating the coming or advent of the Messiah (which in Hebrew means "He who is anointed by the Spirit" or in Greek, Christos), Jesus Christ. Christ was born into the world through the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary to offer us the wondrous gifts of salvation and theosis, our transformation into the likeness of God by sharing in His holiness through the energies of His grace.

Through the mystery we celebrate in the Nativity, we too are invited to become the children of God, sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. But this transformation does not occur overnight. Rather, it requires a rediscovery of the essential disciplines of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Training for Body, Mind and Spirit

For Saint Paul, Christian discipleship is like an athletic contest in an arena, which requires both training and effort. This is the root of the Christian understanding of asceticism and praxis.

By training our body, mind and spirit with the help of God's grace to seek and follow His commands and cultivate the virtues of the saints, in turn we help to extract the poison of corruption, sin and death within our own lives and to realize the saving and transforming power of Christ's life given to us in Holy Baptism.

The Church has traditionally taught four main ways to engage in Christian asceticism, no matter what our state in life. These are prayer, fasting, almsgiving and love. By actively engaging in these disciplines of discipleship during the time of the fast, we unite ourselves more perfectly to Christ as we celebrate the joy of the feast of His Nativity.

Christian Praxis Activities

In anticipation of the advent or "coming" of the Messiah that we celebrate during the feast of the Nativity on December 25, Byzantine Christians enter into a time of preparation known as the "Nativity Fast" (or "St. Philip's Fast" since it begins each year on the Feast of St. Philip the Apostle, November 15).

As with most periods of fast before the great feasts, the season of advent is a time for a deeper interior conversion to Christ by embracing the four forms of Christian praxis. Below we offer some suggestions for ways to put into practice the four forms of Christian praxis or asceticism during the Nativity fast.

Prayer

- Spend at least 15 minutes in the morning and evening in prayer each day.
- Pray the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." 100 times a day.
- Display an icon of the Nativity in the prayer corner of your house or room and spend 10 minutes each day meditating on the saving mysteries surrounding the story of Christ's Birth.
- Receive the Mystery of Repentance (Confession) at least once during the fast.
- Use the prayer guide with family or friends.

Fasting

- Abstain from meat and dairy products on Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays. Dairy is allowed on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but still no meat.
- Fast from certain foods, such as soda, alcoholic beverages or candy.
- With each meal, eat only an amount that is sufficient for nutritional needs, without feeling full.
- Fast from select forms of entertainment (television, movies, radio, internet, novels, etc.).

Almsgiving

- Give your time, talent and/or treasure to a parish outreach or a special charity.
- Increase your parish tithe for the season.
- Clean out your house of any excessive items or possessions and share them with the poor and needy.
- Purchase gifts for homeless or needy children or families.

Charity

- Meditate on the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes and identify one or two of these to put into practice each week.
- Examine your conscience each night, asking for forgiveness from God or others as needed.
- Find opportunities to share your faith with others.

Jesus Prayer Retreat

A good way to live and pray this Holy Season of the Nativity Fast is to participate in the Jesus Prayer Retreat, taking place here at St. John's on Saturday, November 23! Mark your calendars and pick up a brochure for more information. All are welcome and there is no cost!