

## **Keeping the Fasts in the Armenian Orthodox Church**

*Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving and righteousness (Tobit 12:8)*

**1. *When do we fast?*** The Armenian Church along with all of the historic Orthodox and Catholic Churches has several penitential periods of fasting throughout the Church year. In addition to these special seasons of repentance, Eastern Christians regularly fast every Wednesday and Friday throughout the entire year. The practice of reckoning these two days of the week as fast days is a most ancient Tradition of the universal Church which was enshrined in the earliest Christian document outside of the New Testament, entitled the “Didache” or “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles” written between 70-90 A.D. The letter states “Let not your fasts fall on the same days as the hypocrites who fast Monday and Thursday. Rather, you should fast on Wednesday and Friday.” These two days are significant because Wednesday was the day Judas Iscariot connived with the Jewish religious authorities to betray our Lord, and Friday, of course, was the day our Lord was Crucified for our sins.

As mentioned above, besides these ordinary fast days, we also fast during special seasons designated as penitential by the Church. Ordinarily these consist of one week fasts before all of the significant Feasts of the Church (see “Guide” below).

**2. *From what do we fast?*** The late ecclesiastical historian Malachias Ormanian, Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, in his work “The Church of Armenia” explains that what we generally refer to as “fasts” can be further described as either periods of abstinence or of strict fast. “Abstinence” refers to the avoiding of certain kinds of foods for a period of time. “Fasting” is the avoiding of all food for a for a duration of time. Whereas most of our Church fasts are characterized by abstinence from foods derived from animals, e.g. meat and dairy (except fish and honey), the Great Fast is characterized by the total avoidance of food until noon (or in the stricter observance until evening). This rule of fasting and abstinence is enforce from the second to the sixth day of the week (Monday through Friday). Then upon “break-fast,” the rule of abstinence is followed. In the less strict observance, some dairy can be consumed on seventh and first day of the week (i.e. Saturday and Sunday). This pattern is followed for the duration of the Great Fast (hence its name -which western Christians refer to as “Lent”).

When considering the canonical and traditional approach to fasting in the Eastern tradition, it is important to remember that the East never adopted the recent Western innovation of an individualistic self-designed approach to fasting. Nor is the idea of individuals “giving things up for Lent” a part of our tradition. Our’s is a corporate fast which all of the faithful are called to embrace as one Body. We are even to assist one another in this regard. One manifestation of this working together to keep the Fast is the numerous Lenten recipe books that exist. Yet we must also take heed that it has never been the practice of the East to legalistically condemn those who fall short of the above rule of fasting. Indeed the famous Paschal Homily of St. John Chrysostom (+ 407), read every year in many Eastern Churches on Soorp Zadeeg (Holy Easter-Pascha), speaks directly to those who miss the mark during the Great Fast in the most embracing and encouraging language.

The rule of fasting, it must be remembered, is the ideal for which the Church calls the faithful to struggle and strive to reach. This is so because the true Church of Jesus Christ is an ascetical Church which knows that repentance is the key to salvation. She heeds the words of her Master who said, "If anyone is willing to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and keep on following Me" (St. Lk 9:23). Every year is a new opportunity for further growth and greater sacrifice and repentance. But we must never become discouraged when we fall short of the ideal (as we all do).

It is also important to point out that fasting is not limited to diet only. We are to avoid whatever is contrary to the penitential spirit of the season. The Great Fast calls us to give alms for the poor and to set aside more time for prayer. As the "Golden-mouthed" St. John Chrysostom once said, "It is possible for one who fasts not to be rewarded for his fasting. How? When indeed we abstain from foods, but do not abstain from iniquities; when we do not eat meat, but gnaw to pieces the homes of the poor; when we do not become drunkards with wine, but we become drunkards with evil pleasures; when we abstain all the day, but all the night we spend in unchastened shows. Then what is the benefit of abstention from foods, when on the one hand you deprive your body of a selected food, but on the other you offer yourself unlawful food?"

**3. *Why do we Fast?*** One of the foundations of Orthodox Christianity is the belief that we are all sinners in need of repentance and God's mercy. The Orthodox Study Bible defines Repentance, as "a change of mind or attitude, and thus of behavior" and then goes on to state, "God is the author of repentance, which is an integral part of baptism, confession, and ongoing spiritual life. Repentance is not simply sorrow for sins but a firm determination to turn away from sin to a new life of righteousness in Jesus Christ." The OSB also presents the Old Testament background of the practice of fasting: "The Jews typically fasted twice a week (Lk 18:12) on Monday and Thursday. In addition, public fasts were regularly observed or occasionally proclaimed (2 Chr. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; Neh. 1:4-11), especially on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:31-34) and in times of mourning (Zech 7:5; 8:19)." The story of the Prophet St. Jonah is a powerful example of God granting mercy to those who through corporate penance manifested their repentance (cf. Jonah 3:6-10). Other Biblical examples abound: (cf. Est 4:3, 9:31; Jud 4:9,13; Bar 1:5-6; 1 Mc 3:47; 2 Mc 13:12).

Our Lord Heesoos Kreesdos reinforced the importance of this practice by His own Divine-Human example. Before beginning His public ministry, immediately after His Baptism, our Lord withdrew into the desert and fasted for forty days (St. Lk 4:1-15). In keeping the Great Fast, it is our Lord's own example which we imitate: "Jesus fasted to overcome temptation, giving us an example of our own power and limitations. The hunger of His flesh does not control Him; rather, He controls His flesh. Jesus' fasting forty days is the foundation of the Church's forty-day Lenten observance before Holy Week. It is a spiritual preparation for the Passion and Resurrection of Christ" (OSB note, St. Mt 9:14-17).

Therefore the Church, following the Biblical teaching and example of our Lord, invites all of her faithful to lead lives of life-long repentance. Like our own parish's patron saint, John the Forerunner and Baptist (Garabed yev Mugerdeech), the Church calls on us to "produce fruits in keeping with repentance" (St. Mt. 3:8). In the Sermon on

the Mount, our Lord Christ pointed us toward almsgiving (St. Mt. 6:1-4), fasting (6:16-18) and prayer (7:7-11) as hallmarks of our repentance. Yet He also admonished that in making such sacrifices we must not neglect “the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith.” As He rebuked the Pharisees, “these you ought to have done without neglecting the others.” (St. Mt 23:23).

Therefore the Church, in obedience to our Lord’s directive, sets apart numerous days and periods throughout the year for the faithful to reflect on our relationship with God. Where this relationship is lacking we have numerous opportunities to repent, confess, fast, pray and give alms for the poor. This God-given, time-proven formula has been producing holy men and women after God’s own heart for the entire history of God’s people. Therefore the Church does not shrink away from its duty to call upon us to continue on this same course of repentance today. As members of the one catholic and apostolic holy Church, let us all endeavor to follow the Church’s historic, corporate Great Fast, relying on God’s Spirit to help us. By observing the Great Fast, we will be truly prepared for the Great Festival of our Lord and Savior’s glorious Resurrection.

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Sources:

1. The Church of Armenia, Archbishop Malachias Ormanian (p. 178-9)
2. The Domar by the Armenian Orthodox Theological Research Institute
3. What the Fathers Say About... Volume I, Light and Life Publishing Co.

## APPENDIX: A GUIDE TO FASTING PERIODS IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

Although current calendars of the Armenian Church usually do not highlight fast days, the Church's penitential periods can still be followed by:

- a. Remembering all Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days (except during the fifty days following Easter-Pascha up until Pentecost).
  - b. Recognizing that word "Paregentan" on a calendar indicates the beginning of a fast period. These penitential periods are as follows in chronological order and duration of fast (major feasts indicated by all capital letters).
1. The ***Advent Penitential Season*** (comprising fifty days) includes:

- The Fast of Advent (***Heesnagats***) -five days
- The Fast of St. James (***Soorp Hagop***) of Nisibis -five days and
- The Fast of Theophany -five days preceding:

THE THEOPHANY (***ASDVADZAHAYDNOOTYOON***) OF OUR LORD  
AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST (January 6th)

2. The ***Paschal Penitential Season*** includes:

- The Fast of the Catechumens (***Arachavorats***) -a preliminary fast of five days
- The Great Fast (***Medz Bahk***) -forty days and
- The Fast of Great Week (***Avak Shapat***) -one week preceding:

THE HOLY PASSOVER (***SOORP ZADEEG***) and RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD  
AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

3. The remaining ***Shapatabahk*** (week-long fasts lasting Monday through Friday)

- The Fast of St. Elijah the Prophet (***Soorp Yegheea Markareh***)
- The Fast of St. Gregory the Illuminator (***Soorp Kreekor Loosavoreech***)
- The Fast of the TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD (***VARTAVAR***)
- The Fast of the ASSUMPTION OF THE BEARER OF GOD (***VERAPOKHMAN***)
- The Fast of the EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS (***KHATCHVERATS***)
- The Fast of the Holy Cross of Varak (five days)

## **APPENDIX 2: WHAT THE CHURCH FATHERS SAY ABOUT FASTING**

The forty-days fast is to be observed as a memorial of our Lord's way of life and His teachings. -The Apostolic Teachings (A.D. 70-90)

Fasting [not abstinence] on Sundays is not permitted. If anyone be found fasting on the Lord's Day, let him be deposed or excommunicated. -Canon 66 of the Apostolic Canons

Those who believe in the truth of our teachings, first of all, promise to live according to that teaching. Then we teach them how to pray and entreat God with fasting for the remission of their sins; and we the faithful pray and fast with them. -St. Justin the Philosopher and Martyr (+ 165)

We have the fourth (Wednesday) and the sixth (Friday) day of the week in which, according to the sacred institutes, we fast. -Origen (+ 253)

Since we were wounded by sin, we must treat it with penance. But penance without fast is worthless. Then by fasting justify yourself before God. -St. Basil the Great (+ 379)

In ancient times, many Christians received the Holy Mysteries (Communion) at random and without discrimination, especially on the day of their institution (Great and Holy Thursday). Seeing the great harm that comes from the careless reception of Communion, the Fathers have set aside forty days (the Great Fast) for prayer, listening to God's word, and attending services, in order that, after proper purification of our heart by prayer, fasting, almsgiving, night-vigils and confession, we may receive Holy Communion with a clear conscience as many times as possible." - St. John Chrysostom (+ 407)

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye, the ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sins. Let the eye fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful... Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticisms. For what good is it if we abstain from fowl and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers? It is folly to abstain all day long from food, but fail to abstain from sin and selfishness. The Great Fast has no advantage to us unless it brings about our spiritual renewal. It is necessary while fasting to change our whole life and practice virtue. Turning away from all wickedness means keeping our tongue in check, restraining our anger, avoiding all gossip, lying and swearing. To abstain from these things -herein is the true value of the fast. Accept the fast as an experienced educator by whom the Church teaches piety. -St. John Chrysostom

There are three things, my brethren, by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting, and mercy. Prayer knocks at the

door; fasting obtains; mercy receives. Prayer, fasting and mercy: the three are one, and they give life to one another. -Peter Chrysologus, Bishop of Ravenna (+ 450)

The path of fasting leads to the path of purity. Fasting is the cutting off of lust and evil thoughts, the purity of prayer, the illumination of the soul, the guarding of the mind, the deliverance from hardness of the heart, the door to contrition, the occasion for silence, the health of the body, freedom from the passions, the remission of sins.

-St. John Climacus (+ 649)

Wednesday is to be fasted, because the Jews conspired to betray Jesus; Friday because He then suffered for us. We keep the Lord's Day (Sunday) as a day of joy because then the Lord rose for us. -Third Council of Constantinople, 680 A.D.

While fasting, let us purify our hearts, sanctify our souls, and trample down all vices.

-St. Theodore Studite (+ 826)