



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States Monthly Message for the Monastic

November 2024 On Fasting

“With prayers day and night, then, and with fasting and vigils, he pleaded tirelessly for internal chastity of heart and soul.”¹

The Conferences - St. John Cassian

My beloved brethren, as we approach the start of the blessed Nativity Fast, let us examine how the early monastic Fathers understood fasting and how they benefited from it. As we read their sayings, it will become evident that fasting for them was not just about a change of diet, it was, and always will be, about a change of man on the interior, and this is what God desires of us on a daily basis, but even more so throughout every period of fasting.

Abba Dorotheos teaches us saying, “We must not only keep a sharp watch over our diet, *but keep away from all other kinds of sin* so that as our stomach keeps fast, so also may our tongue as we abstain from calumny, from deceit, from idle talk, from railing and anger and all other vices which arise from the tongue. So also let our eyes keep fast. No looking for trivialities, no letting the eyes wander freely, no impudent lying in wait for people to talk to. The same with the hands and feet, to prevent them from doing anything evil.”²

In the Conferences, Abba Theonas cites the Book of Isaiah the Prophet, when God says to us, “Is this not the fast that I have chosen: *To loose the bonds of wickedness*, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him*, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, *your healing shall spring forth speedily*, and your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. *Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’*”³

He goes on to say that fasting, “Is neither good by itself nor necessary for its own sake, *because it is properly exercised for the sake of acquiring purity of heart and body, so that the stings of the*

¹ John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 247.

² Dorotheos of Gaza, Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 218.

³ The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Is 58:6-9.

*flesh might be dulled and a peaceful mind reconciled to its Creator,”*⁴ and also, “You see, then, that fasting is by no means considered an essential good by the Lord, inasmuch as *it does not become good and pleasing to God by itself but in conjunction with other works*. For mercy, patience, and love, as well as the precepts of the aforementioned virtues, in which the good is an essential one, are not to be exercised on account of fasting, but rather fasting on account of them. *An effort must be made to acquire by fasting those virtues which are truly good, and not to turn the exercise of the virtues toward the goal of fasting. The affliction of the flesh is beneficial and the medicine of hunger should be taken in order that thereby we might be able to attain to love.*”⁵

Also in the Conferences, Abbot Moses tells us that, “Diligence in reading and *the affliction of fasting are exercised for the sake of cleansing the heart* and chastising the flesh only in the present, as long as ‘the desire of the flesh is against the spirit.’ For this reason we are diligent in vigils, fasting, and praying, *so that the mind which has been stretched to its limits may not taste earthly things but contemplate heavenly ones.*”

In the Ladder of Divine Ascent, St. John Climacus tells us that, “A fasting man prays austere, but the mind of someone intemperate is filled up with unclean imaginings. A full stomach dries up one’s weeping, whereas the shriveled stomach produces these tears. *And the man who looks after his belly and at the same time hopes to control the spirit of fornication is like someone trying to put out a fire with oil.*”⁶ Here we see again the connection of fasting with controlling the desires.

He goes on to say that, “To fast is to do violence to nature. It is to do away what whatever pleases the palate. *Fasting ends lust, roots out bad thoughts, frees one from evil dreams. Fasting makes for purity of prayer, an enlightened soul, a watchful mind, a deliverance from blindness. Fasting is the door of compunction, humble sighing, joyful contrition, and end to chatter, an occasion for silence, a custodian of obedience, a lightening of sleep, health of the body, an agent of dispassion, a remission of sins, the gate, indeed, the delight of Paradise.*”⁷

In the Paradise of the Holy Fathers, we read the following by Abba Pambo who, referring to himself, said the following, “Pambo is fasting two days and eating a pair of loaves; but is it by this that he becomes a monk? No. Pambo earns two keratia⁸ and gives them to charity, but is it by this that he becomes a monk? Not yet.” He said to them: “*Works are good, but if you keep your conscience [clear] with respect to your neighbor, in that way you are being saved.*” Reassured, they went away with joy.⁹

⁴ John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 732.

⁵ John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 731–732.

⁶ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 168.

⁷ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 169.

⁸ A silver coin.

⁹ John Behr, ed., Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers, trans. John Wortley, vol. 52, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 262.

Saint Basil the Great tells us that, “Fasting is as old as humanity: it was legislated in paradise. It was the first command that Adam received: You shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You shall not eat legislates fasting and self-control. If Eve had fasted from the tree, we would not need this fasting now. *For those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. We have been injured by sin; let us be healed by repentance. But repentance is futile without fasting.*”¹⁰

In order for one to benefit from the fast, one must first examine oneself carefully and find what vice one desires to root out of their heart, and the only way to do so is by struggling to acquire the virtue that opposes it. If one were to do this during every fast of the year, they would, by the grace of God, find themselves advancing and progressing in the spiritual life in a way they never thought possible.

May God grant that as we are, “Consistently maintaining this understanding of the character of fasting, [that] we should seek after it with all our strength, while yet knowing that it is only appropriate for us if it is practiced at the right time, with the right character and to the right extent, and not fixing all our hopes on it but making it possible for ourselves thereby to attain to purity of heart and apostolic love.”¹¹ Amen.

¹⁰ St Basil the Great, *On Fasting and Feasts*, ed. John Behr, trans. Susan R. Holman and Mark DelCogliano, vol. 50, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2013), 57.

¹¹ John Cassian, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 733.