



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

### March 2025 On Fasting & Repentance

*“This much is known to every one, that all strife against sin and its desires is to be preceded by the labour of fasting, especially if one is combating inward sin.”<sup>1</sup>*

**St. Isaac the Syrian**

My beloved brethren, St. Basil the Great says, “Do not define the good derived from fasting only in terms of abstaining from food. *For true fasting is being a stranger to vice.*”<sup>2</sup> He also says, “For you know that the desires of the flesh are against the spirit and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh. So then, since they are opposed to one another, let us diminish the comfort of our flesh and boost the strength of our souls, *so that through fasting from the passions we may achieve victory and be rewarded with the crowns of self-control.*”<sup>3</sup>

St. Isaac the Syrian says that, “*the beginning of the holy way of God and of all virtues, is founded upon fasting and strict punctuality in the service of God*, with the crucifixion of the body during the whole night in the strife against the pleasure of sleep. *Fasting is a strengthening of all the virtues, the beginning of the struggle*, the crown of the Naziraeans, the beauty of virginity and sanctity, the preservation of chastity, the beginning of the way of Christianity, the father of prayer, the fountain of placidity, the teacher of quiet, and the forerunner of all good qualities. As the delight of light belongs to sound eyes, so the desire of prayer follows fasting with discernment. For as soon as a man begins to fast, his mind forthwith will be desirous of interaction with God. A fasting body cannot endure lying on its bed during the whole night. For fasting naturally excites vigilance unto God; not only by day, but also during the night. And the empty body of him that fasts does not grow fatigued in the struggle against sleep. And though his senses are weak, his mind is awake unto God in beseechings.”<sup>4</sup>

He continues saying, “To dwell at length upon the beauties of fasting is not necessary. Many of the teachers and fathers have spoken about the victories of fasting and the many beautiful things originating in it. And all books inform us concerning the importance of fasting and the victories it has given generation after generation, and concerning the mighty help afforded by it, and the high

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. Wensinck with Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie Van Wetenschappen, 1923), 160.

<sup>2</sup> 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), 69.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

<sup>4</sup> A. J. Wensinck with Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie Van Wetenschappen, 1923), 160–161.

praise deserved by those who fast. *And by experience it is known to every one, that it is the fountain of all good [qualities]. As long as the seals of fasting are on a man's mouth, his mind meditates on the soul's penitence*, his heart sends forth prayers and his face is dark with sadness. Evil impulses are afar from him; neither is gladness seen on his brow at all. For he is an enemy of desires and idle occupations. There has never been seen a man who was fasting with discernment who was subjected to evil desire. *For fasting is a storehouse of all virtues*. And he that despises it, makes all virtues totter.”<sup>5</sup>

Abba Dorotheos also shares his thoughts specifically about the Holy Great Fast saying, “*You see, God gave us these holy days so that by diligence in abstinence, in the spirit of humility and repentance, a man may be cleansed of the sins of the whole year and the soul relieved of its burden*. Purified he goes forward to the holy day of the Resurrection, and *being made a new man through the change of heart induced by the fast*, he can take his part in the Holy Mysteries and remain in spiritual joy and happiness, feasting with God the whole fifty days.”<sup>6</sup>

From these words of our holy Fathers, one can learn about the many blessings that can be received from a fast filled with repentance, but one must also be aware that, as St. John Chrysostom says, “*it is possible to endure even the toil of fasting and not receive the reward of fasting*. How? When we abstain from food but do not abstain from sins; when we do not eat meat but devour the homes of the poor; when we do not get drunk from wine but become intoxicated by wicked desire; when we continue without food for the entire day but pass all of it at wanton spectacles.”<sup>7</sup>

St Basil the Great also tells us the following, “Do not fast only to quarrel and fight. You do not devour meat, but you devour your brother. You abstain from wine, but you have not mastered your arrogance. You wait until evening to partake of food, but you spend your day judging others. Woe to those who are drunk, but not with wine! Anger is a drunken state of the soul because, like wine, it robs the soul of sense. Sadness, too, is a drunken state because it drowns the mind. Fear is another drunken state, when things happen that should not happen. For it says: deliver my soul from fear of the enemy. Generally speaking, since each of the passions disturbs the mind, each can rightly be called a drunken state of the mind.”<sup>8</sup>

In order for us to benefit from the fast we must constantly reflect on our day and repent immediately if we find that we have strayed from the goal of fasting, to rid ourselves of vice and to acquire virtue. We must confess immediately and return to our goal once again.

May God grant us to grow spiritually during this Holy Great Fast, through our fasting, prayer, and repentance. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>6</sup> Dorotheos of Gaza, Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 216.

<sup>7</sup> John Chrysostom, On Repentance and Almsgiving, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Gus George Christo, vol. 96, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 70.

<sup>8</sup> 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), 69.