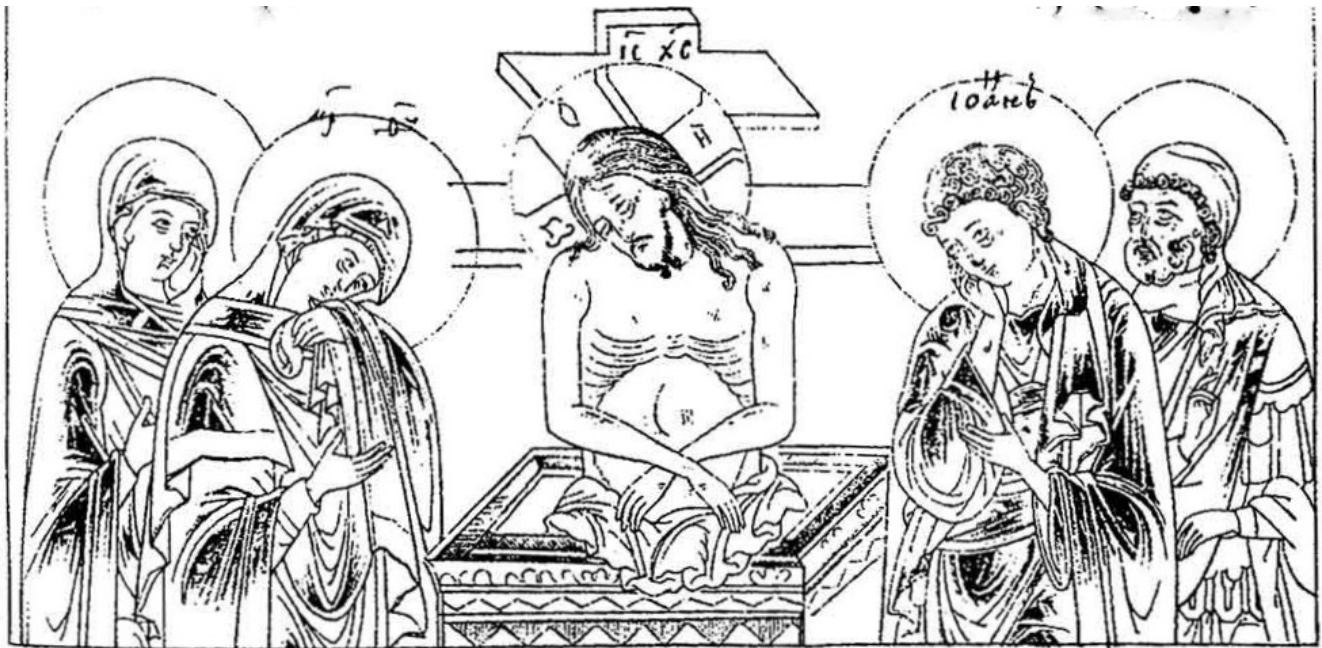


Great Lent, Fast & Liturgy

Two articles by Father Alexander Schmemmann:

The Liturgical Structure of Lent

Fast & Liturgy



The Liturgical Structure of Lent

To understand the various liturgical particularities of the Lenten period, we must remember that they express and convey to us the spiritual meaning of Lent and are related to the central idea of Lent, to its function in the liturgical life of the Church. It is the idea of *repentance*. In the teaching of the Orthodox Church however, repentance means much more than a mere enumeration of sins and transgressions to the priest. Confession and absolution are but the result, the fruit, the “climax” of true repentance. And, before this result can be reached, become truly valid and meaningful, one must make a spiritual effort, go through a long period of preparation and purification. Repentance, in the Orthodox acceptance of this word, means a deep, radical *reevaluation* of our whole life, of all our ideas, judgments, worries, mutual relations, etc. It applies not only to some “bad actions,” but to the whole of life, and is a Christian judgment passed on it, on its basic presuppositions. At every moment of our life, but especially during Lent, the Church invites us to concentrate our attention on the ultimate values and goals, to measure ourselves by the criteria of Christian teaching, to contemplate our existence in its relation to God.

This is repentance and it consists therefore, before everything else, in the acquisition of the *Spirit of repentance*, i.e., of a special state of mind, a special disposition of our conscience and spiritual vision.

The Lenten worship is thus a *school of repentance*. It teaches us *what* is repentance and *how* to acquire the spirit of repentance. It prepares us for and leads us to the *spiritual regeneration*, without which “absolution” remains meaningless. It is, in short, both teaching about repentance and the way of repentance. And, since there can be no real Christian life without repentance, without this constant “reevaluation” of life, the Lenten worship is an essential part of the liturgical tradition of the Church. The neglect of it, its reduction to a few purely formal obligations and customs, the deformation of its basic rules constitute one of the major deficiencies of our Church life today. The aim of this article is to outline at least the most important structures of Lenten worship, and thus to help Orthodox Christians to recover a more Orthodox idea of Lent.

(1) Sundays of Preparation

Three weeks before Lent proper begins we enter into a period of *preparation*. It is a constant feature of our tradition of worship that every major liturgical event – Christmas, Easter, Lent, etc., is announced and prepared long in advance. Knowing our lack of concentration, the “worldliness” of our life, the Church calls our attention to the seriousness of the approaching event, invites us to meditate on its various “dimensions”; thus, before we can *practice* Lent, we are given its basic *theology*.

Pre-lenten preparation includes four consecutive Sundays preceding Lent.

1. Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

On the eve of this day, i.e., at the Saturday Vigil Service, the liturgical book of the Lenten season – the *Triodion* makes its first appearance and texts from it are added to the usual liturgical material of the Resurrection service. They develop the first major theme of the season: that of *humility*; the Gospel lesson of the day (Lk. 18, 10-14) teaches that humility is the condition of repentance. No one can acquire the spirit of repentance without rejecting the attitude of the Pharisee. Here is a man who is always pleased with himself and thinks that he complies with all the requirements of religion. Yet, he has reduced religion to purely formal rules and measures it by the amount of his financial contribution to the temple. Religion for him is a source of pride and self-satisfaction. The Publican is *humble* and humility justifies him before God.

(2) Sunday of the Prodigal Son

The Gospel reading of this day (Lk. 15, 11-32) gives the second theme of Lent: that

of a *return to God*. It is not enough to acknowledge sins and to confess them. Repentance remains fruitless without the desire and the decision to *change* life, to go back to God. The true repentance has as its source the spiritual beauty and purity which man has lost. "...I shall return to the compassionate Father crying with tears, receive me as one of Thy servants." At Matins of this day to the usual psalms of the Polyeleos "Praise ye the name of the Lord" (Ps. 135), the Psalm 137 is added, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept, when we remembered Zion... If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning..." The Christian *remembers* and *knows* that what he lost: the communion with God, the peace and joy of His Kingdom. He was baptized, introduced into the Body of Christ. Repentance, therefore, is the renewal of baptism, a movement of love, which brings him back to God.

(3) Sunday of the Last Judgment

(Meat Fare)

On Saturday, preceding this Sunday (Meat Fare Saturday) the Typikon prescribes the universal commemoration of all the departed members of the Church. In the Church we all depend on each other, belong to each other, are united by the love of Christ. (Therefore no service in the Church can be "private".) Our repentance would not be complete without this act of love towards all those, who have preceded us in death, for what is repentance if not also the recovery of the spirit of love, which is the spirit of the Church. Liturgically this commemoration includes Friday Vespers, Matins and Divine Liturgy on Saturday.

The Sunday Gospel (Mt. 25, 31-46) reminds us of the third theme of repentance: preparation for the last judgment. A Christian lives under Christ's judgment. He will judge us on how seriously we took His presence in the world, His identification with every man, His gift of love. "I was in prison, I was naked..." All our actions, attitudes, judgments and especially relations with other people must be referred to Christ, and to call ourselves "Christians" means that we accept life as *service* and *ministry*. The parable of the Last Judgment gives us "terms of reference" for our self-evaluation.

On the week following this Sunday a limited *fasting* is prescribed. We must prepare and train ourselves for the great effort of Lent. Wednesday and Friday are *non-liturgical days* with Lenten services (*cf. infra*). On Saturday of this week (Cheesefare Saturday) the Church commemorates all men and women who were "illuminated through fasting" i.e., the Holy Ascetics or Fasters. They are the patterns we must follow, our guides in the difficult "art" of fasting and repentance.

(4) Sunday of Forgiveness (*Cheese Fare*)

This is the last day before Lent. Its liturgy develops three themes: (a) the “expulsion of Adam from the Paradise of Bliss.” Man was created for paradise, i.e., for communion with God, for life with Him. He has lost this life and his existence on earth is an exile. Christ has opened to every one the doors of Paradise and the Church guides us to our heavenly fatherland. (b) Our fast must not be hypocritical, a show off. We must “appear not unto men to fast, but unto our Father who is in secret” (cf. Sunday Gospel, Mt. 6, 14-21), and (c) its condition is that we *forgive* each other as God has forgiven us – “If ye forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you.”

The evening of that day, at Vespers, Lent is inaugurated by the Great Prokimenon: “Turn not away Thy face from Thy servant, for I am in trouble; hear me speedily. Attend to my soul and deliver it.” After the service the *rite of forgiveness* takes place and the Church begins its pilgrimage towards the glorious day of Easter.

(1) The Canon of St. Andrew of Crete

The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete. On the first four days of Lent – Monday through Thursday – the Typikon prescribes the reading at Great Compline (i.e., after Vespers) of the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, divided in four parts. This canon is entirely devoted to *repentance* and constitutes, so to say, the “inauguration of Lent.” It is repeated in its complete form at Matins on Thursday of the fifth week of Lent.

(2) Weekdays of Lent – The Daily Cycle

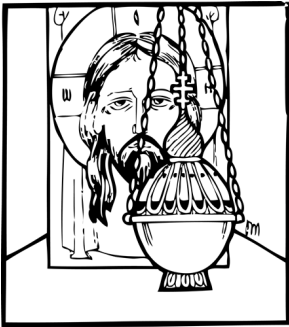
Lent consists of six weeks or forty days. It begins on Monday after the Cheese Fare Sunday and ends on Friday evening before Psalm Sunday. The Saturday of Lazarus’ resurrection, the Palm Sunday and the Holy Week form a special liturgical cycle not analyzed in this article. The Lenten weekdays – Monday through Friday – have a liturgical structure very different from that of Saturdays and Sundays. We will deal with these two days in a special paragraph.

The Lenten weekday cycle, although it consists of the same services, as prescribed for the whole year (Vespers, Compline, Midnight, Matins, Hours) has nevertheless some important particularities:

(a) It has its own liturgical book – the *Triodion*. Throughout the year the changing elements of the daily services – troparia, stichira, canons – are taken from the *Octoechos* (the book of the week) and the *Menaion* (the book of the month, giving the office of the Saint of the day). The basic rule of Lent is that the *Octoechos* is not used on weekdays but replaced by the *Triodion*, which supplies each day with,

– at Vespers – a set of *stikhiras* (3 for “Lord, I have cried” and 3 for the “Aposticha”) and 2 readings or “parimias” from the Old Testament.

– at Matins – 2 groups of “kathismata” (“Sedalny,” short hymns sung after the reading of the Psalter), a canon of three odes (or “Triodion” which gave its name to the whole book) and 3 *stikhiras* at the “Praises,” i.e., sung at the end of the regular morning psalms 148, 149, 150 – at the Sixth Hour – a “parimia” from the Book of Isaiah.



The commemoration of the Saint of the day (“Menaion”) is not omitted, but combined with the texts of the Triodion. The latter are mainly, if not exclusively *penitential* in their content.

Especially deep and beautiful are the “idiomela” (“Samoglasni”) *stichira* of each day (1 at Vespers and 1 at Matins). And it is a sad fact that so little of the Triodion has been translated into English.

(b) The use of *Psalter* is doubled. Normally the Psalter, divided in 20 *kathismata* is read once every week: (1 *kathisma*. at Vespers, 2 at Matins). During Lent it is read *twice* (1 at Vespers, 3 at Matins, 1 at the Hours 3, 6 and 9). This is done of course mainly in monasteries, yet to know that the Church considers the psalms to be an essential “spiritual food” for the Lenten season is important.

(c) The Lenten rubrics put an emphasis on *prostrations*. They are prescribed at the end of each service with the Lenten prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian, “O Lord and Master of my life,” and also after each of the special Lenten troparia at Vespers. They express the spirit of repentance as “breaking down” our pride and self satisfaction. They also make our body partake of the effort of prayer.

(d) The Spirit of Lent is also expressed in the liturgical music. Special Lenten “tones” or melodies are used for the responses at litanies and the “Alleluias” which replace at Matins the solemn singing of the “God is the Lord and has revealed Himself unto us.”

(e) A characteristic feature of Lenten services is the use of the Old Testament, normally absent from the daily cycle. Three books are read daily throughout Lent: *Genesis* with *Parables* at Vespers. *Isaiah* at the Sixth Hour. *Genesis* tells us the story of Creation, Fall and the beginnings of the history of salvation. *Parables* is the book of Wisdom, which leads us to God and to His precepts. *Isaiah* is the prophet of redemption, salvation and the Messianic Kingdom.

(f) The liturgical vestments to be used on weekdays of Lent are dark, theoretically purple.

The order for the weekday Lenten services is to be found in the Triodion

(“Monday of the first week of Lent”). Of special importance are the regulations concerning the singing of the Canon. Lent is the only season of the liturgical year that has preserved the use of the nine biblical odes, which formed the original framework of the Canon.

(3) Non-Liturgical Days

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts

On weekdays of Lent (Monday through Friday) the celebration of the Divine Liturgy is strictly forbidden. They are *non-liturgical days*, with one possible exception – the Feast of Annunciation (then the Liturgy of St. Chrysostom is prescribed after Vespers). The reason for this rule is that the Eucharist is by its very nature a festal celebration, the joyful commemoration of Christ’s Resurrection and presence among His disciples. (For further elaboration of this point *cf.* my note “Eucharist and Communion” in *St. Vladimir’s Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1957, pp. 31-33.) But twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays, the Church prescribes the celebration after Vespers, i.e., in the evening of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts (*cf.* the order of this service in I. Hapgood, *The Service Book*, pp. 127-146.) It consists of solemn Great Vespers and communion with the Holy Gifts consecrated on the previous Sunday. These days being days of *strict fasting* (theoretically: complete abstinence) are “crowned” with the partaking of the Bread of Life, the ultimate fulfillment of all our efforts.

One must acknowledge the tragical neglect of these rules in many American parishes. The celebration of the so called “requiem liturgies” on non-liturgical days constitutes a flagrant violation of the universal tradition of Orthodoxy and cannot be justified from either theological or pastoral points of view. They are remnants of “uniatism” in our Church and are in contradiction with both – the Orthodox doctrine of the commemoration of the dead and the Orthodox doctrine of Eucharist and its function in the Church. Everything must be done in order to restore the real liturgical principles of Lent.

(4) Saturdays of Lent

Lenten Saturdays, with the exception of the first – dedicated to the memory of the Holy Martyr Theodore Tyron, and the fifth – the Saturday of the Akathistos, are days of *commemoration of the departed*. And, instead of multiplying the “private requiem liturgies” on days when they are forbidden, it would be good to restore this practice of one weekly universal commemoration of all Orthodox Christians departed this life, of their integration in the Eucharist, which is always offered “on behalf of all and for all.”

The Akathistos Saturday is the annual commemoration of the deliverance of Constantinople in 620. The “Akathist,” a beautiful hymn to the Mother of God, is

sung at Matins.

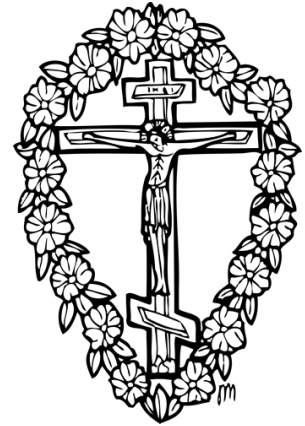
(5) Sundays of Lent

Each Sunday in Lent, although it keeps its character of the weekly feast of Resurrection, has its specific theme, Triodion is combined with Octoechos.

1st Sunday — “Triumph of Orthodoxy” — commemorates the victory of the Church over the last great heresy – Iconoclasm (842).

2nd Sunday — is dedicated to the memory of *St. Gregory Palamas*, a great Byzantine theologian, canonized in 1366.

3rd Sunday — “of the Veneration of the Holy Cross”– At Matins the Cross is brought in a solemn procession from the sanctuary and put in the center of the Church where it will remain for the whole week. This ceremony announces the approaching of the Holy Week and the commemoration of Christ’s passion. At the end of each service takes place a special veneration of the Cross.



4th Sunday — *St. John the Ladder*, one of the greatest Ascetics, who in his “Spiritual Ladder” described the basic principles of Christian spirituality.

5th Sunday — *St. Mary of Egypt*, the most wonderful example of repentance.

On Saturdays and Sundays – days of Eucharistic celebration – the dark vestments are replaced by light ones, the Lenten melodies are not used, and the prayer of St. Ephrem with prostrations omitted. The order of the services is not of the Lenten type, yet fasting remains a rule and cannot be broken (*cf.* my article “Fast and Liturgy,” in *St. Vladimir’s Quarterly*, Vol. III, No. 1, Winter 1959). Each Sunday night, Great Vespers with a special Great Prokimenon is prescribed.

At the conclusion of this brief description of the liturgical structure of Lent, let me emphasize once more that Lenten worship constitutes one of the deepest, the most beautiful and the most essential elements of our Orthodox liturgical tradition. Its restoration in the life of the Church, its understanding by Orthodox Christians, constitute one of the urgent tasks of our time.

The Russian Orthodox Journal, March, 1959, pp. 6-8



Fast and Liturgy

Notes in Liturgical Theology

The liturgical rules of the Orthodox Church prescribe that the Divine Liturgy is to be celebrated after Vespers on certain fast days. These days are: Thursday and Saturday of the Holy Week, the eves of Christmas and Theophany and the Feast of the Annunciation. Likewise the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is always celebrated after Vespers. If we bear in mind that our Typikon determines the time for Vespers according to the sun and not by the clock, then the prescribed time for these evening Liturgies should be approximately from two to five in the afternoon.

It is well known that these rubrics have become dead letter today, or rather they are preserved in form, but in such a way that the Liturgy is not transferred to the evening, but on the contrary, Vespers is served in the morning. This breach of rule should not be explained as a mere condescension of the Church to the “weakness of the flesh,” as a desire to curtail the period of abstinence for the communicants, for we can observe this same practice where the rubrics are scrupulously respected and where no attempt is made to defer to human weakness. In this case, we are forced to deal with the belief, deeply rooted in contemporary ecclesiastical consciousness, that the Divine Liturgy must always be celebrated in the morning. Its vesperal celebration would appear to be an unheard of innovation to the overwhelming majority of Orthodox people, something much more unnatural and irregular than the well-established practice of serving Vespers in the morning and Matins in the evening.



It is obvious however, that in uniting the Liturgy with Vespers, the authors of the Typikon intended more than a purely formal connection between the two services. They meant a deliberate transfer of the Liturgy to the evening, a conscious change in the usual order of services. Again it is obvious that in not fulfilling the rule, or in fulfilling it only as a formality (i.e., in transferring Vespers to the morning) we commit a twofold infraction of the liturgical “typos”; we serve an evening service in the morning which besides being a “nominalization” of prayer, is a contradiction to the common sense, and moreover, we completely ignore the reasons which promoted the Church to order the celebration of the Liturgy on certain days in the evening and not in the morning. But perhaps if we investigate these reasons, we will see in them something more meaningful than a mere detail of rubrics, something forgotten yet essential for the comprehension of our liturgical tradition.

The most general explanation is to be found in the Typikon itself. Chapter 8

contains the following instructions: “on Sunday ye shall begin the Liturgy at the start of the third hour (9 o’clock A.M.), so that the time of breaking fast shall come at the start of the fourth hour; on Saturday ye shall begin the Liturgy at the start of the fourth hour, so that the time of breaking fast shall come at the start of the fifth hour; on lesser holidays and other days, begin at the fifth hour so that the time of breaking fast shall come at the sixth hour.” We have thus a definite relationship between the time (“kairos”) of the Eucharist and the fast, which is to precede it. This “eucharistic fast” must be lengthened or shortened depending on the nature of the day, on which the Liturgy is celebrated. The Typikon considers it self-evident that Divine Liturgy is always preceded by strict abstinence, therefore the general sense of all these instructions is that the greater the holiday, the earlier is the Liturgy celebrated and hence the shorter is the period of abstinence. Let us note in passing, that here too our modern practice clearly contradicts the rubric: we tend to consider a late service more “fitting” for a great holiday, and an early one is “good enough” for every day. The directions of the Typikon might, at first glance, appear to be simple relics of some ancient monastic rule which for some inscrutable reason keep on being repeated from one edition of the Typikon to another. However, if we make an effort to “translate” these dry instructions, we will find in them a whole theology of fasting in its relationship to the Liturgy. Having understood this, we may question and decide whether it is conditional, relative, and pertaining to the past or whether it contains an element of Tradition binding us as well. To discover this is to understand that in these instructions has been concealed the concept of fast, its living experience whose origin is in the Gospel itself, and which, from the very beginning, was received by the Church. In these externally legalistic and almost trivial regulations, it is fashionable today to consider their observance a mere ritualism and pedantry, incompatible with our modern “way of life,” there is revealed a profound understanding of human life in its relation to Christ and the Church. This we will now briefly attempt to set forth.

According to the Synoptics, the Pharisees accused the disciples of Christ of not fasting (whereas they and the disciples of John “fasted greatly”). To this, Christ answered, “Can the wedding guests fast as long as the Bridegroom is with them? As long as the Bridegroom is with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the Bridegroom will be taken away from them, and they will fast in those days” (Mark 2:18; Luke 5: 33; Mt. 9:14). These texts stress the connection between fasting and the Messianic service of Christ, but it becomes impossible in the joy of His Presence. More generally, fasting is the expression of expectation, of the state of waiting and preparation. Thus, Christ contrasts Himself to John the Baptist: “For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine . . . The Son of Man has come. He eats and drinks. . .” John the Baptist in this context is the “type,” the symbol of the Old Testament in its relation to the New Testament. The Old

Testament is the time of preparation and expectation and it comes to its end with the apparition of the Faster. But the Son of Man “eats and drinks” and His disciples also eat and drink and in the Gospel we constantly see the Lord breaking bread with the publicans and sinners in the homes of the Pharisees and also providing food to the multitude of men. For in Christ and with Christ is revealed and comes the Kingdom. And in biblical typology, the Kingdom is often represented as a banquet, as the breaking of fast. (cf. for example, Isa. 25:6). And it is this Scriptural teaching about fast, the Christological and messianic context of fasting that defined the place and the “function” of fasting in the Church from its very beginning. On the one hand, the Church is herself the beginning, the eschatological anticipation of the Kingdom. The Bridegroom is present and His presence is revealed in the breaking of bread, in the eucharistic banquet, which is the sacramental anticipation of the fullness of the Kingdom, of the Messianic banquet. In the Book of Acts, the “breaking of bread” is the essential fact that builds up the “ecclesia,” the Messianic community. (Acts 2:42). In this assembly, in the “koinonia,” there is no room for fasting: the expectation has come to an end, the Lord is present, “maranatha.” He has come, He is coming, He shall come . . . But, on the other hand, with the Ascension of Christ, a new period of expectation has begun: expectation of the “parousia,” of the second glorious advent of Christ, of the fulfillment in which “God shall be revealed as all in all.” The Lord has triumphed and is glorified, set the history of “this world” is not yet achieved, it awaits its consummation and judgment. Whereas the history of the Old Testament was directed at the coming of the Messiah, the history of the New Testament is directed at the return of the Lord in His glory and the end of the world. That which the Church has and acknowledges in the “mysterion” already, will become evident at the end of this world. And inasmuch as the Church is still in “statu viae” and Christians are still living in this world, they expect, they wait for, this “parousia,” they pray and keep the vigil for they do not know when the Son of Man shall come. And this expectation is expressed therefore in a new fasting, in a new state of awaiting.

This expectation, this yearning, is now constantly fulfilled and answered in the sacrament of the Lord’s Presence, in the Eucharistic banquet. Living in time, in history, the Church reveals already the triumph of eternity, anticipates the glory of the Kingdom which is “to come.” And this “fast — expectation” finds its consummation in the Sacrament, when in the same and eternal commemoration we represent, i.e., make present and real, both the first coming of Christ and His “parousia.” Thus, fasting and Eucharist form, so to say, two complimentary and necessary poles of Church life, manifest the essential antinomy of her nature: expectation and possession, fullness and growth, eschatology and history.

These considerations give us the key to the “technical” rules of the Typikon, fill

them with spiritual meaning. They express the essential liturgical principle of the incompatibility of the Eucharist with fasting: the *Eucharist cannot and must not be celebrated on a day of fasting*. Being the sacrament of Christ's presence, the Eucharist is the feast of the Church, or even more, the Eucharist is the Church as Feast, and consequently the measure and the context of all feasts. For a feast is not a mere "remembrance" of such or such an event of the earthly life of Christ, but precisely the reality of His presence in the Church by the Holy Spirit. And therefore whatever event or person are commemorated in a feast, this commemoration necessarily finds its fulfillment in the Eucharist, in the "mysterion" which transforms remembrance into presence. The Eucharist manifests the link between all particular events, all the saints, all the theological affirmations with the saving work of Christ. Whatever we commemorate, whatever we celebrate, we always discover – and this discovery is made in the Divine Liturgy – that in the Church everything has its beginning in Jesus Christ and everything has in Him its end, its fulfillment. We can note here that the Orthodox Church has never accepted the principle of a non-festive Eucharist, similar to the Roman "low Mass." For a long period, the Eucharist was an essentially dominical cult because it is always Paschal by its very nature, it always announces the death of Christ and confesses or bears witness to His Resurrection.

A second principle necessarily follows the first. *It is that of fasting period, which must precede every Eucharistic celebration*. Expectation must precede fulfillment. From this point of view, the eucharistic fast is not a simple abstinence before communion, it is made primarily of expectation and spiritual preparation. It is fasting in the scriptural sense indicated above, the waiting for the sacramental Parousia.

In the early Church, the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist was preceded by a night vigil which was precisely (and theoretically still is in the Eastern Church) the service of preparation and getting ready, a vigil in the full Christian meaning of the word. And this is why the Eucharist on Sunday and on great holidays is prescribed for the early hours of the day: it is the fulfillment, the end of the vigil, of the service of fasting and preparation. But on a lesser feast, which has no vigil, the celebration of the Eucharist takes place at the end of morning, for in this case, the morning hours of fasting constitute the necessary period of preparation. Thus the whole liturgical life of the Church which, in turn determine the life of each member of the Church, is built on this rhythm of expectation and fulfillment, preparation and "presence." And the rules that govern this rhythm cease to be archaic and incomprehensible but become signs of a path leading us to the very heart of life in the Church.

But fasting has also a second meaning, that completes the one we have just analyzed. It has been particularly stressed and developed in Monasticism. It is the ascetical fast, fasting as a fight against the demonic powers, as a method of spiritual

life. The origin of this idea of fasting also goes back to the Scriptures. Before Christ went out to preach, He fasted for forty days and at the end of this period Satan approached Him (Matthew 4:3). In the Gospel, we find a clear statement that fasting and prayer are the only means for a victory over Satan (Mt. 17:21). For the advent of Christ not only fulfills the history of salvation, it is also the decisive moment in the struggle against Satan, who has become the “prince of this world.”

According to the Bible, it is through food that Satan conquered man and became his master. Man has tasted of the forbidden fruit, and in doing so has become enslaved to food, so that his whole existence depends on it. This is why fasting, in this biblical perspective, is not to be equated with a mere moderation in eating, with a kind of elementary hygiene. The genuine fast, the true abstinence, the one which the Church glorifies in her holy “fasters,” is indeed a challenge to the so called laws of nature and through them to Satan himself. For nothing hurts him more, nothing destroys his power more than this transcending by man of the laws, of which he has convinced man that they are “natural” and “absolute.” Without food man dies therefore his life depends entirely on food. And yet by fasting, i.e., by refusing voluntarily food man discovers that he lives not by bread alone. And then fasting becomes the denial of what has become “necessary,” the real mortification of that flesh which depends entirely and exclusively on the “unescapable laws of nature.” In fast, man reaches that freedom which he has lost in sin, recovers in the cosmos the Kingship he had annihilated by transgressing the will of God. Fasting is a free return to the fulfillment of that commandment which Adam has transgressed. Accepting it, man again receives food as a Divine gift, food ceases to be a “necessity” and becomes the very image of the messianic banquet, for “eat in order to live” has become again “live in God.” This idea of fasting rooted in Christ’s forty days of fasting and His encounter with Satan, is the foundation of the *ascetical* fast, which one must distinguish (but not separate) from the *eucharistic* fast, defined above as a state of preparation and expectation.

Nothing can better show the relationship between these two aspects or functions of fasting than Lent and its liturgical particularities. On the one hand, Sundays and Saturdays, being essentially days of Eucharist, are “liturgically” excluded from Lenten fasting. They have none of the distinctive liturgical marks of “fasting” days. The eucharistic fast is always limited by the rhythm of the Eucharist itself, its limit being the Liturgy to which it is related as preparation to fulfillment. It is achieved and accomplished in the reception of the eucharistic food. The eucharistic fast is thus a function of the Church, for it corresponds to a state of the Church herself. The ascetical fast, on the other hand, is first of all individual, being a personal accomplishment in the Church. The regulations concerning this fasting, which differ according to various local traditions, are relative in the sense that they are primarily

indications of a well established method, a sure guidance, but not an absolute teaching of the Church. These rules depend on the climate, on the way of life in a given sociological context, on external conditions etc. The orders to eat figs on such day and beans on another, orders that we still find in the Typikon, obviously cannot be accepted literally, or considered as “absolute.” The important thing here is to understand that the eucharistic fast is the fast of the Church, while the ascetical fast is the fast of a Christian in the Church. The latter is determined by the nature of man, the former by the nature of the Church. Thus if during Lent, the eucharistic fast finds its conclusion every Sunday in the eschatological fullness of the Sacrament, the ascetical fast is not interrupted, for multiseular experience proves that its spiritual fruits ripen slowly and require a long and sustained effort. Between them however, there is no contradiction. A monastic dinner on a Lenten Sunday must be “meager” as to its alimentary quality and quantity; it is nevertheless a Sunday dinner, a breaking of fast, for following the Eucharist and the eucharistic fast, it belongs spiritually to the experience of joy and fullness which is the substance of the Christian Sunday.

It is impossible to indicate here all the theological implications of fasting as it is described and prescribed in our liturgical tradition. We can only point to its essential significance. The Church lives on two levels, has two “states.” She is waiting for, but she also possesses already, the object of expectation. In time, in history, she is not only “in via,” on her way to the Kingdom, but also the manifestation of this Kingdom. And the meaning of her life is that these two “states” are not separated from each other, do not oppose each other in a radical contradiction. Each of them is founded in the other and is impossible without it. Eternity does not empty or make absurd and meaningless either time or our life in time, but on the contrary gives them all their weight, all their real value. The Church fills with an eternal truth, with reality which she alone possesses, the apparently meaningless flow of time. The rhythm of the Church, the rhythm of the Eucharist which comes and is always to come, fills everything with meaning, puts all things to their real place. Christians do not remain passive between one celebration and the next one, their “temporal” life is not empty, is not “diminished” by eschatology. For it is precisely the liturgical “eschaton” that ascribes real value to every moment of our life, in which everything is now judged, evaluated and understood in the light of the Kingdom of God, the ultimate end and the meaning of all that exists. There is nothing more alien to the true spirit of Orthodox liturgy than a certain superstitious “liturgiologism,” or an “eschatologism” which reduces the whole Christian life to communion and despises everything else as “vain.” Such liturgical “piety” does not realize that the true significance of the Eucharist is precisely that of judgment, of transformation, of making infinitely important, the whole life. For the Eucharist bears witness to the Incarnation, and since it has been

coordinated with time, introduced into time, time itself and each one of the moments in time are filled with meaning, acquire a significance in relation with Christ. Indeed, all the things of life, small and great, have ceased to be an end and a value in themselves, yet it is not in such isolation and self centeredness that they were truly “absurd”? But now, understood in the perspective of the Kingdom, all of them can and must become signs and means of its coming, “instruments” of the world’s salvation in Christ.

This is why it is so important that beyond liturgical “aestheticism” or rigid “rubricism,” we recover the real meaning of the liturgical time, described in such a simple way in the Typikon. It is here that the Church has concealed the treasure of her love, of her wisdom, of her “practical” knowledge of God. The liturgy of the Church must be liberated from a trivial “schedule of services” and become again what essentially it is: the sanctification of time and in it of the whole life, by the presence of Christ. Only such a liturgy does not divide the life of a Christian into two lives, the one “sacred” and the other “profane,” but transfigures the one by the other, making the whole existence a confession of Christ. For Christ did not come in order that we “symbolize” His presence but in order to transform and save the world by His presence.

We must understand that the liturgy of the Church is profoundly realistic, that Vespers is in a real rapport with this particular evening: it is this evening that we as Christians must spend “perfectly, in holiness, in peace and without sin,” it is this evening that must offer and dedicate to God, and this evening is already illumined for us with the light of another Evening, of another End, the one which we expect and at the same time fear, and which is approaching in our human time. In the liturgy, we discover how seriously indeed the Church considers time, food, rest and all the actions, all the details of our life. In the world in which God became man, nothing can even be withdrawn from Him.

Expectation, encounter, possession: in this rhythm, the Church dives and by it, she measures time. But there are days when this expectation reaches its extreme “concentration”; the days of the vesperal Eucharist. The Church has conscientiously and totally dedicated them to expectation and preparation, to fasting in its full sense. They are spent in the same everyday activities, which fill any other day. And yet how infinitely meaningful, how deeply “important” and responsible, are each word that we pronounce in the light of this expectation, each action that we perform! Yes, it is on such days that we are given to realize what is, what ought to be Christian life, we live then as if they were illumined by what is to come! The Eve of Nativity, the supernatural quiet of Holy Saturday, the days of Lent when we prepare ourselves for the presanctified service, how all this should “build up” a Christian soul, lead it to the comprehension of the Mystery of Salvation, to the transformation

of life . . . And when finally comes the evening, when all this fasting preparation and expectation are fulfilled in the Eucharist, our life is really taken into this Eucharist, is “related” to the joy and the fullness of the Kingdom.

Thus a “rubric” can and must become for us what it was for the Christians in the past, a law of prayer, a law of life.

St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 1959, pp. 2-9