

CHRISTIAN FASTING IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY: CONSIDERING THE CRITERIA

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Introduction

The contemporary world is a complex and fluid reality, an amalgam in the making. A serious question that arises in the first place is: in what sense is it adequate to call the contemporary world postmodern? Postmodernity is conceived as a fragmentation: a fragmentation of universalisms, public space, and the human self, which means a profound break with the cohesion of modernity. However, contemporary societies are more than that. While the rupture with modernity grows, at the same time somehow they remain in durable connection with it. Grand narratives have found themselves under heavy attack, yet nevertheless they have not evaporated (the ongoing debate over ecumenical values testifies to this) and some claim their return. So, postmodern, modern, as well as pre-modern elements (such as the nostalgia for theocracy) and even post-postmodern trends¹ can be found in this fluid reality only conventionally called a postmodern society. In fact, not only the developed world, which is purportedly where the academic ideological war between these trends is being waged, but also every society on earth has been going through the process of becoming a postmodern society, meaning specifically a fluid osmosis of different and often contradictory elements in varying degrees.²

- 1 See, for example, Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). Also, Alan Kirby, "The Death of Postmodernism and beyond," *Philosophy Now* (2006), accessed 5-1-2013, http://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond.
- 2 The case of African hybrids is characteristic. See James Carey, "Introduction," in

As regards postmodernism, which is the ideological current related to postmodernity, I strongly agree with Ien Ang, who finds it necessary to make a distinction between conservative and critical postmodernism. Conservative postmodernism is the trend that succumbs to the “anything goes” attitude, and therefore indulges in a nihilistic relativism. On the contrary, critical postmodernism is motivated by a deep understanding of the limits and failures of what Habermas calls the “unfinished project of modernity,” by the need to respond to these limits and failures through a skeptical questioning of the certainties and absolutisms of modernist ways of thinking. In this regard, the distinction between postmodernism (as an ideological stance) and postmodernity (as a historical phase) is an important one: while one can refuse to be a postmodernist, i.e., an adherent of the “anything goes” logic, and instead remain loyal to the more cohesive convictions of modernism, one cannot deny or escape the reality of postmodernity. In this perspective Zygmunt Bauman is right in claiming that postmodernity is nothing else than the modern mind taking a long, attentive, and sober look at itself.³

For Christians, being aware of the worldly realities they live in is interwoven with the very self of the Church and her mission, that is with the process of encountering the world and manifesting the Kingdom, inviting the world in and transforming it into a new creation. All these are eventually summed up in what a Church Council has to be.

A real Council is always an *ecumenical* event, which means that it concerns the oecumene and its life [...]. It comprises a real Theophany and Pentecost in its own era [...]. The manifestation of Christ in every single era is precisely God's Revelation for that era, and it is always achieved through the materials

Spirit Possession. Modernity and Power in Africa, Heike Behrend & Ute Luig, eds. (Oxford: Fountain Publishers; Kampala: David Philip; Cape Town: The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1999), xiii–xiv.

- 3 Ien Ang, “The Performance of the Sponge: Mass Communication Theory Enters the Postmodern World,” in *The Media in Question: Popular Cultures and Public Interests*, Kees Brants, Joke Hermes, & Liesbet van Zoonen, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 74–75.

offered by the said era [. . .]. God's revelation in a certain era is the very era, when the era is elevated to an icon of God. It is then that the godlikeness of the elements that comprise the era is manifested; it is then that the era (not only as time, but mainly as the total of the elements of life, as culture) is offered to God and is nourished by him, it is liberated from the devil's slavery, it is cleansed, built up into an edifice of the Living God; it is transformed into the Church and is saved. If it is not so, then the Revelation is merely past and does not save.⁴

Needless to say, this task is not accomplished in any mechanical way. The Church has to strive hard in order to live out the evangelical criteria and prove herself faithful to her Lord. Her inner life, that is her own structure and function, has to be a living witness to the Kingdom and serve the encounter of her Good News with the world.⁵ It is in this framework and in this perspective that the issue of fasting emerges. More than being a matter of technical arrangements, the issue of fasting coincides with the broader issue of how food is understood in all its many facets: nutritional and symbolic, societal and anthropological.

Studying the signs of times

As early as in 1961 Roland Barthes highlighted the *polysemia* of food (i.e., the multiplicity of meanings of food) as a modern phenomenon. While in older societies the meaning was organized around festivities, in modern times food is regarded as an essential part of every aspect of human life (work, leisure, sports, etc., corresponding to the business lunch, fast food, healthy snacks, and so on). Food has come to acquire a huge number of meanings and social connotations. Barthes eventually prophesized that "food [...] will lose in substance and gain in function."⁶

4 Panayotis Nellas, "The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church," *Synaxi* 76 (2000): 30–31 [in Greek]. It first appeared as a pamphlet: "The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. Some Thoughts for Its Theological Approach and Preparation," *Thessaloniki*, 1972 [always in Greek].

5 See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "The Church as Mission. Fr Alexander Schmemmann's Liturgical Theology Revisited," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 60 (2010): 6–41.

6 Roland Barthes, "Towards a Phychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,"

As is well known, modern societies are profoundly individualistic and consumerist. However, postmodernism has signaled a change, a new and strange emergence of the human subject. "Postmodern consumption," clarify two specialists, Maria Kniazeva and Alladi Venkatesh, almost half a century after Barthes,

is not a purely rational but a largely symbolic activity. This activity starts with the consumer perception of an object not as a material thing valued for its functional benefits but as a symbol that carries the weight of values that are mentally assigned by the consumer. Thus, the objects are replaced with symbols, and consumers, in turn, become both the producers and consumers of these symbols. Such transformation of objects into symbols is argued to be the crux of postmodern consumption. Consequently, this view regards the subject (a consumer) not as someone seeking to satisfy an end (needs), but as someone seeking to produce (construct) symbols.⁷

Thinking about food appears to be a new tendency. Food is thought about not only by specialists but also by the entire public.⁸ So two shifts have taken place: first from traditional culture to consumer culture, and then from consumer culture to re-imagined culture, which implies postmodern, creative consumption.⁹

A central issue in "thinking about food" is dieting, that is, the struggle with food and body image. Today vast numbers of people are preoccupied with this intentional hunger, which comprises a modern phenomenon, almost unknown in earlier societies as well as in parts of the contemporary world outside the dominant western culture. This means that abstinence has largely become part of daily life, yet with varying connotations. The emphasis on

in *Food and Culture. A Reader*, Carole Counihan & Penny Van Esterik, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997 [first published in 1961]), 26.

7 Maria Kniazeva & Alladi Venkatesh, "Food for Thought: A Study of Food Consumption in Postmodern US Culture," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 6 (2007): 422, accessed 1-May-15, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cb.232/pdf>.

8 *Ibid.*, 432.

9 "Postmodern Dining. Contemporary Reflections on Food Trends," accessed 1-May-15 <http://www.tinderboxthg.com/downloads/PoMoDining2008.pdf>.

body management produces beliefs, symbols and rituals that have come to function much like a religion, the “religion of thinness.”¹⁰ Though metaphysics does remain a cardinal difference between secular dieting and religious fasting,¹¹ from an anthropological and psycho-sociological point of view the lines between “religious” and “secular” attitudes become blurred, because thinness becomes a matter of all-pervading significance, an end whose achievement feels tantamount to salvation, as Mary Douglas and others have pointed out.¹²

Individual improvisation is highly developed; however, *ethnic* dietary traditions have not vanished. On the contrary, recent investigations such as Eric Schlosser’s book, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, suggest that a nation’s diet can be more revealing than its art or literature.¹³ Moreover, it seems that “in many cases the globalization process does not eradicate, but rather stimulates the rebirth or reconstruction of local and regional values.”¹⁴ Standing before this ethnic diversity, Postmoderns hasten

- 10 Michelle Lelwica, “Redefining Womanhood (?): Gender, Power, and the ‘Religion of Thinness,’” *Anthropology of Food* (5 May 2006), <http://aof.revues.org/571>.
- 11 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89, 98. Here he has emphasized the difference in their ends. Cited by Michelle Lelwica, *op. cit.*
- 12 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1991²), 2–3, 68–72. Moreover, Catherine Bell has shown that ritual practices should not be divided into secular or religious on the basis of given inherent characteristics, because every ritual has the capacity to constitute itself as distinct from—and holier than—other, more mundane ways of acting. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Cited by Michelle Lelwica, *op. cit.*
- 13 Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2012²). See Kniazeva, Venkatesh, *op.cit.*, 420; also, 426, for the cultural impact of dieting: “In their cross-cultural work, Belk et al. (2003) also report that the American female interviewees critically associate their food desires with sin and guilt, while women in Turkey are found to be more permissive and frame such desires as matters of imbalance and lack of control.”
- 14 Georgina Holt and Virginie Amilien, “Introduction: From Local Food to Localized Food,” *Anthropology of Food*, Special Issue 2 (March 2007), accessed 5–1-2013, <http://aof.revues.org/405>. Claire Delfosse, «La patrimonialisation des produits dits de terroir,» *Anthropology of Food* 8 (2011), accessed 1-May-13, <http://aof.revues.org>.

to single out elements from different traditions, detach them from their context, and set up a collage with a highly subjective meaning. This “creativity” of course raises several questions, especially concerning societal life, identity, and communication. The postmodern rejects modern rationalism, paternalism, and exalts marginalism. This may liberate several so far overlooked human potentials, but at the same time, it may signal a process of disintegration. It has been pointed out that for postmodernists the individual is no longer understood even in terms of an individuality that is the sum of one’s parts, but as the “parts of his sum,” as an ever-changing collection.¹⁵ This contradistinction (“sum of one’s parts” *versus* “parts of one’s sum”) sufficiently delineates the intensity of the anthropological problem in our time, given that both formulas stand apart from relational anthropologies which acknowledge the reception of the Other as a substantial element of personhood and refuse to interpret the human subject solely on the basis of its own properties.

All these characteristics converge on what might be called “the fetishism of desire.” The philosopher Panayotis Kondylis emphasized that the “mass democratic postmodernity,” which is the dominant western reality, has been based on an unprecedented, astonishing, and world-historical *novum*: the possibility of the ceaseless satisfaction of material expectations. The very realization of the human person has been conceived only in terms of abundance and consumption.¹⁶ At the same time, however, and

org/6772. Thomas Wilson, “Globalization, Differentiation and Drinking Cultures, an Anthropological Perspective,” *Anthropology of Food* 3 (2004), accessed 5–1-2013, <http://aof.revues.org/261>. Also, Edward R. Carr, “Postmodern Conceptualizations, Modernist Applications: Rethinking the Role of Society in Food Security,” *Food Policy* 31 (2006): 14–29, accessed 5–1-2013, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919205000473>.

15 Timothy Iles, “Tampopo: Food and the Postmodern in the Work of Itami Juzo” (24–4-2010), accessed 5–1-2013, <http://eigageijutsu.blogspot.gr/2010/04/tampopo-food-and-postmodern-in-work-of.html>.

16 Panajiotis Kondylis, *Der Niedergang der burgerlichen Denk-und Lebensform: Die liberale Moderne und die massendemokratische Postmoderne* (Weinheim: VCH-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1991), 169–88 especially.

in parallel with this affluence, huge parts of the globe have been experiencing unintended hunger. Contradiction is a fundamental characteristic of our world, and it should not be overlooked when studying the signs of the times. At this moment, not only the Third World but also almost the entire developed world is experiencing the eruption of the demonic into the world in its full force in the form of economical neo-liberalism, which claims that everything (human dignity and life included) is merchandise, and which imposes markets above politics and legitimizes injustice for the sake of private profit. Neo-poverty and hunger threaten to expand in the guts of the western world and reaffirm that crisis is an unavoidable stage in the evolution of rapacious capitalism.

The Church has to meet this complex world and articulate an invitation of hope in contemporary language. Formerly, the appeal to tradition alone formed a powerful argument, since the human subject conceived itself as integral part of a community, which derived its identity from faithfulness to its past. But now "Generation Y," that is, populations whose birth-dates range approximately between the early 1980s to the early 2000s, attributes very little value to tradition, distrusts the way things were done in the past, and is constantly seeking self-expression in a highly postmodern, individualistic spirit.¹⁷ Strangely enough, these characteristics hamper and at the same time facilitate the Church's encounter with the world. The shift from the consumerist model to a more creative one may converge with the Christian conviction that the human subject has been called to be active and bring a new meaning to history. On the other hand, the Church cannot surrender her communal ideal and succumb to individualism. In the Christian perspective, both feasting and fasting have a strong communal dimension; every attitude toward food is an act of sharing. Besides, in a world which tends to multiply meanings and symbolism, the Church has to welcome this trend as a quest for truth

17 A. Berner, Cl. van Tonder, "The Postmodern Consumer: Implications of Changing Customer Expectations for Organization Development in Service Organizations," *Journal of Industrial Psychology* 29.3 (2003): 6.

and respond to it with her own belief that the truth of the world is a Person who lies beyond the constituent parts of the world and beyond decay, and that it is precisely because of this otherness that He can give the world what its constituent parts cannot afford—life abundant (cf. Jn 10:10).

For Christians, *receiving* food is an act of thanksgiving and experiencing the world as a gift. Yet, *abstaining* from food is a confession that the world is not the source of life. The *feast* is a sign of the joyful Kingdom, while *fasting* declares that the Kingdom in its completeness is still expected. It is the dialectics of the presence and absence of the Bridegroom, as Christ himself put it (cf. Lk 5:33–35). Therefore, while expectation is a major dimension of Christian life, nevertheless, for Christians expectation is not inertia, it is action, a violence for the sake of the Kingdom (cf. Mt 11:12). Christians are called to reject naturalism and form a way of life that surpasses biological reductionism and places love beyond the otherwise invincible survival instinct. In this perspective, fasting becomes “an icon of the future life”¹⁸ insofar as it is an act that introduces into everyday life a foretaste of the eschatological freedom from necessity. In bold outline, here lie the criteria of Christian fasting: understanding the world as creation, the expectation of the *eschaton*, and love in practice, which guide us in the exploration of some specific issues.

Four Specific Issues

Chemistry

The discussions on fasting triggered by the preparations for the Great Council of the Orthodox Church, seem to be monopolized by the debate on readjustment, i.e., whether the established regulations can change based on *oikonomia*, as condescension to contemporary people's weakness. Therefore, the discussion has focused mostly on two things: the reduction of the duration of fasting periods (for example, halving the Christmas Fast) and the enrichment of fasting

18 Asterios of Amaseia, *Or. 14*: PG 40, 373D.

foods (for example, increasing the number of fasting days on which oil and fish are allowed).¹⁹ The most recent document, which some claim has exhausted the issue and is the final proposal *ad referendum* for the Great Council,²⁰ was unanimously approved by the Third Pre-Council Conference in 1986. This document recommended that all the established fasts remain as they are, and added that

it is placed at the spiritual discretion of local Orthodox Churches to define the measure of humane oikonomia and condescension by relaxing in these special cases the customary “strictness” of sacred fasts.²¹

Given the widespread fundamentalist conviction that fasting cannot be adjusted at all, or can be adjusted only ecumenically and not on the local level, we have to admit that a synodical confirmation of this pastoral flexibility may be of considerable help. However, for a sober ecclesiastical consciousness it may just be much ado about nothing! Normally there is no need for the convocation of a Council if the only thing we have to say is that the observation of the fasting discipline is assigned to the responsibility of the shepherds and the faithful! This flexibility is commonplace in church life and has been affirmed since early Christian times. “If you can shoulder the Lord’s yoke in its entirety,” reads the *Didache*, “then you will be perfect; but if that is too much for you, do as much as you can.”²² And this has been reiterated umpteen times in Church literature throughout the centuries—for which we may be truly thankful.

19 See especially the proposal by the Serbian Orthodox Church at the 1971 Preparatory Commission at Chambésy, which as a matter of fact initiated the debates.

20 Metropolitan of Switzerland, *Toward the Holy and Great Council: Problems and Perspectives* (Athens, 1990), 105 (in Greek). See the document on pp. 199–205: “L’importance du jeûne et son observance aujourd’hui.” Also Hilarion, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk, “Inter-Orthodox Cooperation in the Preparations for a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” (3–11–2011), accessed 5–1–2013, <http://www.mospat.ru/en/2011/11/03/news50923/> (Russian Orthodox Church. Official website of the Department for External Church Relations).

21 “L’importance du jeûne,” 8, op. cit., 204.

22 *Didache* 6, 2–3 in *Early Christian Writings*, trs. Maxwell Staniforth & Andrew Louth (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 193. Mentioned also in the 1986 report; see “L’importance du jeûne,” 2, op. cit., p. 200.

However, the discussion would open entirely new perspectives if it were put on another basis, based on understanding certain deviations from older regulations not as *oikonomia* but as *exactitude* (the normal application of the rule). *Ascesis* is not an exceptional task pertaining to a special group within the Church, but it coincides with Church membership. Every Christian is an ascetic, constantly trying to discern right and wrong, constantly trying to be a new creation.²³ Therefore, forming new arrangements in order to apply (or rather incarnate) the ascetical ideal in each particular era and context is the very task of the Church; it is exactitude!²⁴ On the contrary, being stuck on a past model may lead to distortion of the ascetical ideal in contemporary contexts. I will immediately explain what I mean.

A distinction between permitted and non-permitted food in fasting times is probably necessary on the basis that the faithful act not individually, but as members of a Body. Yet some misconceptions may be lurking in food-listing. Despite the fact that in Christian doctrine foods are not divided into “clean” and “unclean,” what prevails in the common consciousness of most Orthodox Christians is a “chemical” theology, which devotionally and passionately observes the components of foods. Very often, delicious and luxury dishes are welcomed as fasting food, provided they do not contain prohibited elements. The plea of the 5th-century *Lausiac History*, which places the emphasis on self-restraint and not on chemistry, seems to have passed into oblivion:

23 So I can hardly agree with the Roman Catholic emphasis on clergy and monasticism: “The precept of penitence must be satisfied in a more perfect way by priests, who are more closely linked to Christ through sacred character, as well as by those who in order to follow more closely the abnegation of the Lord and to find an easier and more efficacious path to the perfection of charity practice the evangelical counsels. The Church, however, invites all Christians without distinction to respond to the divine precept of penitence by some voluntary act,” Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini* of the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI, *On Fasting and Abstinence*, 17–2-1966, Chapter III, accessed 5-1-2013, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19660217_paenitemini_en.html.

24 To put it another way: every act of the Church is *oikonomia* according to the original meaning of the biblical Greek word that refers to the administration of a household.

Drinking wine with reason is better by far than drinking water in arrogance [...]. Please, look at the holy men who drink wine with the bounds of reason, then look at the corrupt men who drink water without moderation. Do not blame or praise the material itself, but deem blessed or unhappy the intention of those who use the material well or badly.²⁵

It is not by chance that “chemical” fasting has annulled all other kinds of fasting, which are found in the tradition and demonstrate the creative nature of Christian fasting (e.g., complete abstinence from eating, fasting until mid-afternoon, eating less in order to save money for charity, or abstaining not from food but from favorite activities, etc.). The issue at stake, in a few words, is criteria! Allow me to mention only a few cases where the evangelical criteria may be blurred and the ascetical ideal abolished under the petrification of tradition and the domination of “chemical” metaphysics:

First, current discussions simply ignore the vast numbers of vegetarians and vegans, who, under the medieval regulations, are urged to fast by abstaining from what they already abstain from throughout the year. Similarly, as said before, vast numbers of people today are preoccupied with diet and everyday abstinence, which poses new questions for *ascesis*.

Second, the reality of the Third World remains outside our discussions. For instance, Orthodox families who live in fishing villages by Lake Victoria read in the rubrics that they can fast by replacing meat with fish, when fish is a kind of daily bread to

25 Palladius, *Lausiac History*: PG 34, 1003–4; Robert T. Meyer, trans., *The Lausiac History* (Ancient Christian Writers 34) (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 26. In the Second Preconciliar Conference (Chambésy, 3–12 September 1982) the Greek Metropolitan of Peristerion, Athens, reminded us that the real meaning of fasting lies not on the kind of food, but on abstinence. He characteristically noted that a monk who loves vegetables is not really fasting when he eats vegetables during Lent. See *Synodica VIII: Ille Conférence Panorthodoxe Préconciliaire* (Chambésy, 3–12 September 1982), (Chambésy, Genève: Secrétariat pour la Préparation du Saint et Grand Concile de l’Eglise Orthodoxe / Les éditions du Centre Orthodoxe, 1994), 161–63. Cf. Panayotis Nellas’ sharp critique to the initial preparatory documents; Panayotis Nellas, op. cit., 35–36.

them, or abstain from vegetable oil when it does not exist there at all! Should their local church stick to the letter of the established rules, the true meaning of fasting (*ascesis*) will thereby be abolished. Again, if the local church should decide to deviate from the established regulations and agree upon different dietary rules, then this should be done in the spirit of the Incarnation, that is, as an act of exactitude and reception of actual life into the Church life, not in the spirit of Eurocentrism, as a purported act of *oikonomia*. Other cuisines, beyond those of the traditionally Orthodox countries, are not a deviation from the "normal." They are simply other normals.

The issue at stake here is not an oversimplifying defense of either pure localization or pure globalization. Globalization, after all, is a complex phenomenon. It enforces dietary homogenization, yet at the same time it brings local production and dietary ways from the margins into the central world stage. Therefore, the issue at stake is the encounter of the Church with what comprises the real life in real context in real time. The Church's task is not to form a detailed, universal dietary list, but to make her universal criteria crystal clear.

We have to take into serious consideration the fact that a kind of reversal has taken place in religious consciousness. Historical study reveals beyond any doubt that fasting has been a variable and changeable institution.²⁶ Today, however, many people are convinced that faithfulness to tradition implies immutability. However, quite the opposite is the case: it is the abolition of these characteristics (variation and changeability) that negates tradition and drains it of its dynamism. What should remain immutable are not the forms but the criteria of *ascesis* and its purpose. St Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 125–202) expresses the spirit of a living tradition, which understands variability in fasting practices as exactitude:

The dispute is not only about the day but also the practice of the fast [...]. Such variation in observance did not begin in our own day but much earlier in the time of our predecessors, who seem to have disregarded accuracy for simplicity

26 Cf. the heated debate at the Second Preconciliar Conference, 1982; *Synodica VIII*, op. cit., p. 157–59.

in establishing future practice. Nevertheless, they all lived in peace with each other, as we do, and the disagreement in the fast affirms our agreement in faith.²⁷

Expectation

As is well known, theology has adequately highlighted the fact that fasting is the expression of expectation and preparation, while the feast represents the Kingdom and necessarily involves the breaking of fast. This permeates the entire church experience—liturgical and theological—and ranges from long fasting periods to preparation for every eucharistic celebration. This is powerfully expressed in the principle of the incompatibility of the eucharist with fasting and in the fact that, as Alexander Schmemmann has pointed out, the Orthodox Church has never accepted a non-festive Eucharist, similar to the Roman “low Mass.”²⁸

These valuable principles, however, seem to be overlooked in certain cases of established fasting practices, and some problems arise that, it should be noted, are due to the tendency to extend fasting periods, a tendency which is conceived by many as a token of piety. Take for example the feast of the Transfiguration of the Savior (6 August). This feast holds great meaning, since it is the foretaste of Christ’s resurrection and a sign of the final resurrection of all. However, in established practice the feast has been downgraded to a *fasting* day, that is, to one of the days preceding the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos (15 August). The fast of the Transfiguration is only mitigated by the allowance of fish. This practice contradicts not only the meaning of the feast, but also the principle that the feasts of Christ cannot be “subordinated” to other feasts. This established contradiction is the outcome of age-long disputes on the introduction and the relationship of the two feasts. It was the Byzantine emperor Leo VI the Wise (886–912) who abolished the festal character of the Transfiguration feast, and the

27 Irenaeus, cited by Eusebius, *The Church History* 5, 24, Paul L. Maier, tr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 199.

28 Alexander Schmemmann, “Fast and Liturgy. Notes in Liturgical Theology,” *SVTQ* 3.1 (1959): 2–9.

meat allowed on it, and joined its five fasting days with the Dormition fast. Yet we know that even after one century some continued to celebrate the Transfiguration properly as a non-fasting day, while others integrated it into the fasting days preceding the Dormition feast, arguing simply that the latter was the older.²⁹ However, this is apparently an argument based on archeology, not on theology. And it is of special importance that as late as in the 12th century the Byzantine canonist Theodor Balsamon insisted that only the fasts of Wednesday, Friday, and Lent were the obligatory fasts, established by holy canons, whereas all the others were not obligatory.³⁰

The feast of the Dormition gives rise to one more question. In current practice, if the Dormition feast is on a Wednesday or Friday (which are fasting days dedicated to Christ), then the feast is “subordinated” to the day of Christ and remains a fasting day, fish consumption being added. The objection here is that every feast is a sign of the Kingdom and should function in the framework of the two complementary poles of Church life, expectation and fulfillment. How can the eucharistic celebration be paired with fasting? It is noteworthy that the 1971 Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Committee proposed that if the feasts of Saints Peter and Paul as well as the feast of the Dormition were on a Wednesday or Friday, the fast should be abolished.³¹ Yet the proposal was rejected by the Third Pre-Council Conference in 1986.

29 Anastasios of Caesaria in Palestine and Nikon the Mavronoreite, in *Collection of the Divine and Holy Canons*, Vol. II, eds., G. A. Rallis and M. Potlis (Athens, 1852), 588–90 [in Greek]. Cf. Fr. Demetrios Tzerpos, “The Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord,” in *The Christian Festive Calendar*. Papers delivered at the 8th Panhellenic Liturgical Symposium of Representatives of the Holy Bishops, Holy Synod of the Church of Greece (Athens 2007), 239–63 [in Greek]. See also Robert Browning, “Dormition,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 1, Alexander P. Kazhdan, et al., eds. (New York—Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 651–52, and Gerhard Podskalsky, Robert F. Taft, Annemarie Weyl Carr, “Transfiguration,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 3, 2104–5.

30 G. A. Rallis & M. Potlis, op. cit., vol. 2 (Athens, 1852), 89–90 (Balsamon’s comment on Canon 79 of the Apostolic Canons) and vol. 3 (Athens 1852), 116 (his comment on Canon 19 of the Synod in Gangra).

31 *Towards the Great Synod. Proposals of the Interorthodox Preparatory Committee on*

The tendency that favors extending fasts and understands this as an Orthodox credential should be seriously questioned. During the Second Preconciliar Conference (Chambésy, 3–12 September 1982), the Greek Metropolitan of Kitros maintained that according to authentic tradition the Church does not change things, but only adds and increases. He vehemently argued:

I would be happy and grateful if one could show me any decrease of any fasting period throughout the 2000 years of Church life.³²

This position, however, reproduces the logic of archaeology at the expense of theology and living faith, as if history *per se* amounts to the criterion of truth. The aforementioned protest by Theodor Balsamon testifies to the fact that multiplying and extending the fasting periods has never been a unanimous and unquestionable practice. It is also characteristic that in the 6th century St Anastasios of Antioch informed his readers that in older times the fast of the Apostles lasted until the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos, but that it was reduced by the holy fathers on the ground of *oikonomia*, and more specifically for two reasons (which, I might add, bring out the concern of the Church to correspond to real life): first, so that Orthodox fasting would be discernible from that of schismatic and heretical groups who observed the same period; and second, for the people's weakness and negligence.³³ No matter what facts Anastasios had in mind, the interesting point here is his certainty the Church practice also includes a shortening of fasting periods.

All these instances invite us to a very simple yet fundamental reconsideration. Shortening the duration of worship may well be a manifestation of laziness that bypasses *ascesis* and its purposes.

the Six Themes of the First Stage (Chambésy, Geneva: Secretariat for the Preparation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church / Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1971), 42 (in Greek).

32 *Synodica* VIII, op. cit., 161. Translation mine.

33 Anastasios of Antioch, Or. 4, *On the Holy Three Lents*: PG 89, 1397BC. Also in G. A. Rallis & M. Potlis, op. cit., vol. 4, (Athens, 1854), 584.

But equally the “long prayers” are not necessarily a token of piety; it may well be a reason for condemnation (cf. Mk 12:40; Lk 20:47). We should not forget that Christ himself ascribed the practice of “keeping on babbling” to the pagans (cf. Mt 6:7). 20:47).

Ecology

That we as human beings can ruin our own home, that is, destroy the ecological balance on the planet, was inconceivable in earlier centuries. Likewise, advanced food technology that seems to defy the flow of the seasons and the climate, was something unthinkable. They are both new realities, tightly bound to man's relation with food. They both nourish the gigantism of egoism and the self-consciousness of humans as the overlords and proprietors of the world. Thus, insofar as the Church conceives of the world as a gift (not as an asset) and understands receiving food as an act of thanksgiving (not as a mechanical procedure), then the issue of fasting cannot be examined separately from the issue of food production and hedonism, which is ready to sacrifice everything for its own satisfaction.

“Chemical” fasting seems to have poisoned religious consciousness for good. It contributes to an impoverishment of the mystery of the living God, insofar as purchasing or avoiding certain elements is taken as being equated with the quintessence of the spiritual life. Other issues that ought to accompany food consumption simply evaporate before the power of “chemical” religiosity. For example, what kind of respect toward God's creation does the Christian show when he consumes fish without paying any attention to the problem of overfishing that jeopardizes the very existence of certain species on earth? Is it really a Christian attitude to fasting when we eat kiwi fruit produced in economies based on ruthless child labor or vegetables irrigated with water containing lethal hexavalent chromium? Why doesn't our way of thinking become relevant to contemporary world, forming new ways of fasting, such as limitation or modification of cooking activities if unrenovable energy is being used?

This is the first question. However, it should be paired with one more. Not only the ecological problem, but also ecological

sensitivities should be critically considered. The ecology movement, which arose in the late 1960s, has to do with a very wide spectrum of perceptions and stances, from rationalist activism to semi-idolatry and from everyday recycling to sophisticated “postmodern metaphysics,” which try to combine the objective understanding of the world with the participation of the subject in it.³⁴ Should the Church remain at a primitive stage, which is the stage of the theoretical discovery of the ecological consciousness? While we have to rejoice that Church leaders are showing great theological interest in ecology, at the same time we have to notice a portion of naivety lurking in this interest. Some are so excited about the discovery of ecology that they do not take into account the crucial issue of the economic system. The Church should take into serious consideration the fact that all the while the dominant economic system has striven to absorb ecological opposition and turn it into a new kind of profitable enterprise. Ecology divorced from the quest for a just and sustainable economy may degenerate into a bourgeois cause, into “green consumerism” or “green capitalism,” which both constitute a contradiction in terms.³⁵ Already by the mid-twentieth century, the anthropologist Margaret Mead had emphasized that the so-called “green revolution” and the boasting “of how much rice previously hungry countries will export” do not resolve the problem of hunger. The main problem is ethical and has to do with “the relations between the haves and the have-nots.”³⁶ Similarly, Mary Douglas agreed with the renowned economist Amartya Sen that famines cannot be explained by food shortages; they are liable to occur even in prosperity.³⁷ Therefore,

34 Arran E. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (London: Routledge, 1995), 97.

35 “The Big Green Con: Seeing through the Sham of ‘Green’ Capitalism,” *Direct Action* 47 (2009): 17. See <http://www.solfed.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/da-sf-iwa-47.pdf> (accessed 1-May-2013).

36 Margaret Mead, “The Changing Significance of Food,” in *Food and Culture. A Reader*, Carole Counihan & Penny Van Esterik, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 18, 13.

37 Mary Douglas, “The Food Problem,” in *Food in the Social Order. Studies of Food and Festivities in three American Communities* (Collected Works) (Abington, Oxon: Routledge, 2003²), 1–2.

what has to animate food production and food consumption is food distribution and the quest for solidarity.

Solidarity

It is important that the pre-synodal document of the 1986 conference contains a paragraph on the connection between fasting and charity, and special, though noticeably laconic, reference is made to starving people on earth.³⁸ However, it is more than obvious that this parameter has not imbued the whole discussion. The dominant understanding of fasting is highly individualistic, although it vehemently rejects individualism on a verbal level: fasting is usually experienced as a struggle exclusively *within* the individual (having to do either with dietary issues or with uprooting passions). No doubt, the transformation of the self is important, but it cannot be worked out in the absence of the “sacrament of the brother,” that is without the loving relationship with the Other. In few words, the issue at stake is whether the Other emerges in our life as a real other, that is as an embodied subject who shares with our life, not simply as an element or a power or a ghost within us.

Tradition is more daring and groundbreaking than many of its self-appointed advocates. From the perspective of living tradition, chemically-accurate fasting with no concern for the real Other is not the accomplishment of the fundamental task, with charity being merely an inessential “extra” achievement. This kind of fasting is not only defective, it is demonic. Behold the notion of “uncommunicable” fasting, as expressed by Eusebius of Alexandria (possibly 5th century³⁹):

The Christian who is fasting [...] has to give [to communicate] to those who do not have. He who is fasting but does

38 As is well known, in the last decades the Roman Catholic Church has experienced a move from legalistic understanding of fasting to solidarity. See Kent Berghuis, “Toward a Contemporary Christian Theology of Fasting,” accessed 5-1-2013, <http://bible.org/seriespage/chapter-5-toward-contemporary-christian-theology-fasting>.

39 “Eusebius of Alexandria,” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05617a.htm>

not share his own bread with the hungry, cancels his fasting.
It is fruitless, since it is uncommunicable.⁴⁰

The praxis or actions of early Christians shaped initiatives that inoculated everyday life with solidarity and changed real life. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (late 4th c.) asked the faithful to offer to poor people the food spared because of the fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.⁴¹ In addition, apologist Aristides (2nd c.) conveys to us the precious information that charity not only accompanied the fixed days of fasting, but it also inspired extra fasting initiatives as a means for fundraising.⁴² Christians—he says—used to fast for two or three days in order to save some money for the under-privileged. Activities such as this strongly echo the biblical prophetic word. The people were urged to fast truly by caring for the oppressed and weak: “This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.’” (Zech 7:9–10; cf. Is 58:5–6; Jas 1:27).

Patristic literature is overflowing with such references to the liberating task. However, one might wonder why this dimension of fasting is not to be found among the fasting regulations of the holy canons. These only deal with fasting days and food categories. Is it because fasting as a means for solidarity was considered self-evident? Or perhaps the institutionalization of religious life was more consistent with typical regulations, such as food categorization and so on?

Conclusion

Fasting is the art of becoming hungry and thirsty. Hunger and thirst are always a signal that a being has started to decay and will not survive unless it receives reinforcement from outside in the form

40 Eusebius of Alexandria, Or. 1, *On Fasting*, PG 86, 316AB.

41 *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 5, 20: PG 904 A.

42 Aristides, *Apology* 15; J. Rendel Harris, tr., *The Apology of Aristides on behalf of the Christians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 49. See also <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html> (accessed: 1-May-13).

of food. In the Christian way, however, hunger and thirst are to be transformed into a quest for what is truly substantial for humans, for the food that does not perish (cf. Jn 6:27). The Gospel says that the fasting Christ was confronted with the devil in the desert after he became hungry (cf. Mt 4:2–3; Lk 4:4–3). It was a hungry and thirsty God-man who showed us the way out of the three major religio-political temptations of the human person: the *miracle* that enslaves freedom, the *mystery* of self-assertion, and the *power* to subjugate. To be a Christian coincides with being hungry and thirsty, that is an incomplete being, a being in the making, in *statu viae* until the final banquet is held, in *statu belli* until resurrection, hungry and thirsty for justice. If we are not in a position to testify to this prophetic outlook, what will be left is a task for dieticians and cooks. If that is all we want, let us indeed leave it to them.