

The Child's Fast

Question:

Some say that children do not have to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays and during the four fast seasons prescribed by the Church until they are seven years of age, or three years of age. Others say the fast for children on those days can be relaxed only to a white fast (milk, eggs, cheese). Which is correct, and to what degree do children have to fast like adult Christians?

Answer:

The answer to the above question or questions cannot be based upon the Holy Canons as we have usually done up to now, because there isn't a single Canon that addresses the problem of fasting for children. However, we can arrive at an answer on the basis of our overall understanding of fasting and the purpose of fasting.

Children do not fast and have no need to fast like adult Christians for the simple reason that children do not have those adults sins, urges and bad habits that need to be healed, tamed or eradicated. And the fast is the powerful weapon for this purpose in the hands the adult Christian, for which reason it is commanded by God and established and prescribed by the Church.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that children are completely exempt from the fast and that they need not fast at all. How and when children will fast depends not on any definitive church regulate (because, as we have said, such a prescription does not exist), but upon the devotion and faith of their parents. And parents truly need much wisdom and good judgment so as not to sin against the bodily or the spiritual needs of our children.

Two Extremes

While we are on the subject, is it appropriate to ask the question: how long is a child "a child"? We know that the child passes through several phases of childhood development. First is the suckling infant. Then follows early childhood (from two to three years), and then the child is a preschooler, then a pupil of primary school, and further on to puberty. For some parents a child is "child" until he completes his military service, or even later. Obviously, on and the same principle with regard to the fast cannot be applied to all these phases of childhood.

In resolving this question, parents have a tendency toward two extremes. Either they will impose a strict fast (as they themselves fast) upon the child from early childhood, or they will "protect" him from the fast all the way to adulthood or even later. Both one and the other extremes are harmful to the child and deadly for his spiritual life. In the first instance, when an

excessive fast is imposed on the child from early childhood, before the child can have an understanding or appreciation of fasting and its purpose, a revulsion against the fast and a rejection of it can be provoked. Even though as a youngster he will listen to his parents and "fast", if it is excessive he can develop an aversion to the fast and throw it completely out of his life when he grows up, and that is deadly for his soul. And on the other hand, if a child from a young age does not become accustomed to any fast at all, and never learns the difference between fast days and fast-free days, he will have difficulty ever in life accustoming himself to the fast and exercising self-denial, and that is in no way less deadly than the first extreme.

Not An Obstacle

Avoiding both these extremes, and leading one's child between "the devil and the deep blue sea" is a real art. This art is mastered by parents who themselves, first of all, live an intensive spiritual life, and thus consciously fight both for their own salvation and for the salvation of their child's soul. The responsibility of parents is not only to bring the child into the world, to prepare him for this earthly life and provide for his physical development, but to make him a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven by training him in the Orthodox faith. Many parents among our Orthodox brother Russians and Greeks know how to do this, and we would do well to learn from them.

For example, nothing is more normal than for a young mother to bring her beloved babe in arms (later in a buggy) to church every Sunday and every feast day, and immediately after his baptism to bring him to Holy Communion at every Divine Liturgy. Many mothers do this in Greece with their child of one or two months, and on throughout his entire childhood. Naturally, neither the mother nor the priest even think about some kind of "fast" for the child before Holy Communion. The baby that morning would be fed as usual, but that is not an obstacle to his being united with the Lord in the sacrament of Holy Communion. And so the child grows in God's temple, nurtured physically at his mother's bosom, and spiritually at the Holy Chalice. And so, if he is accustomed from his first days to the church environment, to the light of beeswax candles, to the smell of incense, to the priests vestments (and beard), and so grows up, he begins to enjoy the church and feel completely at home in it. It will be difficult for anyone or anything later to separate a child raised in this manner from his love for Christ and His Church.

Everything Backward

With us, sadly, everything is backward. According to some "wives Tales" and opinions, it is "not good" to commune a child until his third or even fifth year. And when they bring him to Communion for the first time, and

that usually is the first time he sees a priest, he goes into a fit of screaming and grabbing; a very unpleasant scene ensues, so that it becomes impossible to Commune him. It is not unusual for such children to return home not having received Holy Communion. That fear of the priest (frequently adults frighten him that if he doesn't fast, the priest will cut off his tongue), virtually always stays with the child, and very few of these children change their attitude toward the priest and Holy Communion when they grow up.

But parents who are concerned for the spiritual side of the child's life will not wait for the child to finish growing up before they start accustoming him to the fast. They start gradually, from the third or fourth year. Not that the fast is necessary for the child of that age, in the sense that it is for adults, but just to accustom him from the early years to begin to distinguish that all days are not the same with regard to food, which will remain with him as a priceless treasure all his life.

What applies to the fast applies also for the sacraments of Holy Confession and Holy Communion. According to the teaching of the Church the child until his seventh year has no sins, or his sins are not counted to be of significance, and for some this is the case until his tenth year. But among our brother Russians and Greeks the parents begin to bring their children of four or five years to "Confession" again, not because of some sins they committed, but so that from the early years they become accustomed to that holy and indispensable Christian obligation of the spiritual life from which there will be no return when they grow up. And at the same time they develop trust and freedom in their relationship with the priest, their spiritual father.

Only now, I believe, is it clear what the relationship should be between children and the fast, and all those various opinions expressed in the question were in fact exclusive toward one or the other direction. Truly, those parents who endeavor to live according to God's commandments, who work at their own personal salvation under the guidance of an experienced spiritual father, will know how to find the right path, the "golden mean" with regard to their child's fast, and his participation in the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Repentance, Holy Confession.

Peace to you and joy from the Lord.

+ Bishop Artemije of Kosovo