

Joy of Fasting

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His Holiness Pope Shenouda III

Pope of Alexandria & Patriarch of the See of St. Mark

-An excerpt from His Holiness' book The Spirituality of Fasting.

We are not of the type of people who fast and, while fasting, long for the time to break our fast. On the contrary, when we are not fasting we long for the time when fasting will return.

A spiritual person rejoices over the periods of fasting more than he does over feast days during which he eats and drinks. Many are those who long for fasting during the fifty-day period that follows Easter and during which there is neither fasting or continual prostration. Their longing for fasting increases so strong that they rejoice at the arrival of the Apostles' fast having been deprived of the joy of fasting during the preceding fifty days.

Those who are spiritual rejoice so much at fasting that general fasts are not sufficient for them. Thus, they urge their father confessors to allow them to add their own additional fasts. They support their request with the argument that their spiritual condition becomes stronger during the period of fasting, their health improves and that their bodies become lighter.

Those who claim that fasts should be shortened and reduced in number attest to the fact that they have neither experienced the joy of fasting nor known its benefits.

God willing, we shall discuss in the coming chapters the benefits of fasting as the source of joy for the spiritual and the lifestyle for the monks.

A Way of Life -

So loved was fasting to our fathers the monks, that they made it their lifestyle.

They fast, with the exception of feast days their whole life. They did not suffer from physical fatigue but discovered in it spiritual delight, found satisfaction and became accustomed to it.

It was once said that on one occasion, at the advent of Lent in the desert, a herald was sent calling upon monks and drawing their attention to the sacred fast. When one of the elders heard the herald's exhortation, he said to him: "Son, what is it this fast you are talking about? I am not aware of it because all my days are the same. (I.e. that all of them are days of fasting)."

Saint Paula the anchorite used to eat only half a loaf of bread at sunset.

Some monks used to fast every day until sunset like a holy monk who once said; "Thirty years have passed by during which the sun has not seen me eating".

Some monks used to fast for days. Saint Makarius the Alexandrian, for example, fasted though out the year and ate only once week during the Holy Lent, while visiting the Monasteries of Saint Pachomius.

The fasting of our fathers, were not confined to specific periods, or the length of time, but also as form of monasticism, applied it to the kind of food they ate.

Abba Nofer, the anchorite, ate dates from a palm tree at his place of seclusion. Saint Moses the anchorite, as well as Saint Pigimy, another anchorite, ate desert grass and drank from the morning dew.

Consistent fasting regulated the lives of the Fathers.

This lifestyle of a monk becomes comforting and harmonious for both the body and the soul. A stable lifestyle, to which they become accustomed which regulates their lives.

As for the pitied laymen, they sway from one extreme to another when fasting. They deprive themselves of food only to break their fast to partake of anything they desire.

They abstain for a while, to allow themselves what they want for another period, then go back to indulgence, thus they sway between abstention and indulgence. They build, then destroy, and then build again, only to demolish again without recovery.

True fasting is to train oneself in self-control, to follow for the rest of your life.

Self-control becomes a blessing for his life, not only during the time of fasting when we change the time and the food we eat, but also during the normal days.

In this context, fasting is not a punishment but a blessing.

Confessor fathers used to impose as a sever form of punishment for their spiritual sons, to break their fast early, to eat meat or appetising foods. This was done in order to abase their spiritual son's proud heart that thinks of itself to have become a hermit or an ascetic. He would thus bring down his arrogance by making him eat and feel abased to rid him of thoughts of vain glory.