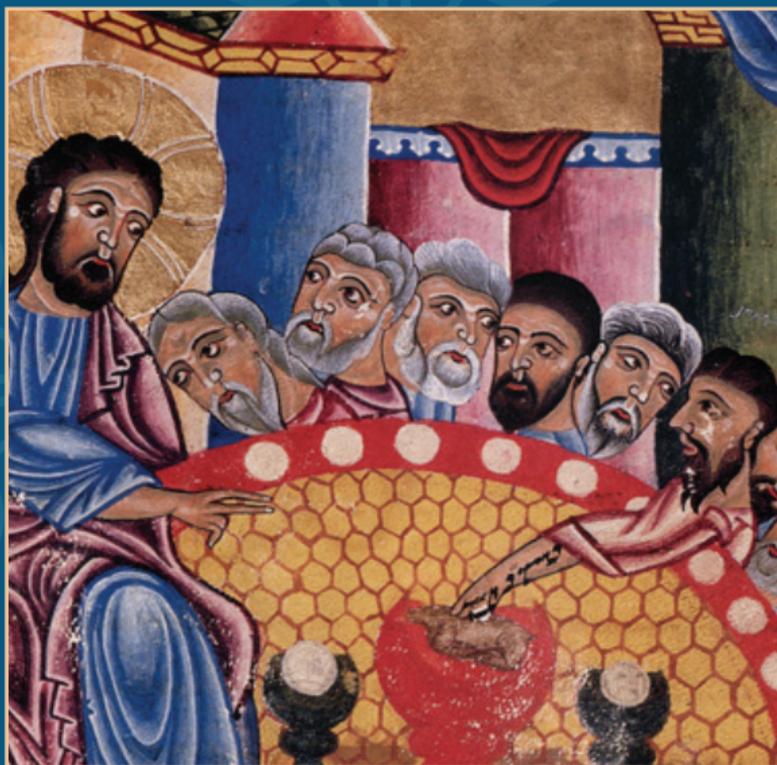


WITH JOYOUS TEARS

The True Meaning of Fasting



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Written by Fr. Shahe Ananyan

WITH JOYOUS TEARS

The True Meaning of Fasting

“Indeed, my son, it has been more than fifty-three years since I have not known when Great Lent begins and when it ends, for all my life is fasting”.

Lives and Sayings of the Holy Fathers, 10:53

Such an approach to fasting, so succinctly articulated by our desert fathers, forms the foundation of the whole spiritual life of the Armenian Church. Fasting is not just a particular time dedicated to God. Rather, it is a way of entering more deeply into what is a life-long spiritual experience. For this reason, fasting days and seasons have been established by the Church throughout the year to direct our hearts and minds toward a life of constant prayer and worship. The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. The significance of fasting lies in its deeper meaning, about which many of our church Fathers have left us inspired instruction. One of the most important principles and frequently repeated comments is that fasting involves not only abstaining from food; it is primarily about abstinence from sin so as to commune more intimately with God and our fellow human beings.

The symbolism of fasting is not associated with winter, but spring; not death, but resurrection. Long vespers at the weekday services, the dark vestments of the priest, our closed altars with their black curtains give it a somber aspect. Notwithstanding the special restrictions for the celebrations of marriages

in the weeks of the fast, these elements of austerity should not blind us to the fact that the fast is neither a burden nor a punishment. Rather, it is a gift of God's grace. Significantly, the English word "Lent" originally had the meaning "springtime".ⁱ Thus, fasting should be associated not so much with sadness, but with inner joy and happiness, as we yearn for our Creator, our heavenly Father, in whose image every human being was created. The Orthodox tradition has a poignant phrase to describe this inner experience: "joyous tears"ⁱⁱ, i.e. with tears we deplore our transgressions and sins, but these are also tears of joy, as we become cognizant of the immense love and mercy of our heavenly Father who is always ready to forgive our faults and misdeeds.

Today, fasting has unfortunately become a neglected spiritual practice. Misunderstandings regarding the nature of fasting have caused many Armenian Christians to fast very little or not at all. Let us remember that the Lord Himself practiced fasting (Mathew 4:1-11) and encouraged His disciples to fast as a spiritual weapon (Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29; Luke 2:37). The Apostles, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, considered fasting one of the most important spiritual practices of the Church and fasted regularly (Acts 14:23; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 7:5; 2 Corinthians 6:5, 11:27, etc.).

If even Our Lord and His disciples considered it necessary and beneficial to fast as a regular practice, how much more ought we to today? The example of the Lord is encouraging: He experienced hunger and temptations from the enemy but emerged victorious (cf. Mathew 4:1-11). We can expect to experience the

same challenges when we fast, but with God's help, we too can overcome them. We can also follow Jesus' example in fasting before significant moments or acts in our lives. Such a dedicated time of fasting allows us to consecrate and prepare ourselves for the work God has for us.

But why do we fast? When do we fast? Where do we fast? And why, for example, is it so important for our Church to fast before solemn feasts such as Christmas and Easter?

FASTING IN THE BIBLE

Fasting was a widespread discipline in many ancient religions. While it had a pious dimension, fasting more often meant simply to voluntarily abstain from food. In the Bible, however, fasting is always associated with deep religious conviction and spiritual intention, such that it is never just a mere bodily practice or duty with no deeper significance. While the Bible provides no direct command, examples of fasting appear in both the Old and New Testaments. It seems that to the ancients, its benefits were so obvious that it went without saying that one should fast. Jesus assumes as much in one of the most telling passages about the practice (Matthew 6:16-18), where He teaches His disciples the way they should fast: *"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received*

their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Christians do not fast in order to appear pious or righteous. Fasting is a practice that involves humbling yourself before God and other people. If one fasts in order to earn a spiritual ego boost, then one misses the point entirely.

In the Old Testament we find records of great men and women of faith who practiced fasting of various duration and for various reasonsⁱⁱⁱ. The greatest prophet of the Old Testament, Moses, before having written the Ten Commandments on tablets upon Mount Sinai, “was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water” (Exodus 34:28). The great defender of monotheism in Israel, the prophet Elijah, prior to his experience of God’s revelation on mount Horeb, “traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God”, fasting the whole time (III Kingdoms [I Kings] 19:8). The prophet Daniel, while trying to remain faithful to the commandments of the Lord, fasted ten days for strength, wisdom, and discernment (Daniel 1:12). Two heroines of the Jewish people were strengthened spiritually and physically thanks to the fasting that they practiced for the salvation of their people in very difficult moments (Esther 4:16; Judith 8:5-6). One of the first fathers of the Church, St. Clement of Rome (c. 35 A.D. – 99 A.D.), in his “First Letter to the Corinthians”, beautifully described the close connection between fasting and the acts of heroism of these two courageous women: “The blessed Judith, when her city lay

under siege, asked the elders for permission to go out to the foreigners' camp. And so, she handed herself over to danger, going out because she loved her homeland and the people under siege. And the Lord handed Holofernes over to the hand of a female. No less did Esther, a woman perfect in faith, put herself in danger to rescue the twelve tribes of Israel who were about to perish. For through her fasting and humility she petitioned the all-seeing Master, the God of eternity, who saw the humbleness of her soul and rescued the people for whom she put herself in danger."^{iv}.

In the Old Testament, fasting was often accompanied by other expressions of humility and despair, such as weeping, mourning, and lamenting, as well as wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes. Another reason for fasting is to ask God for something (II Kingdoms [II Samuel] 12:13-24). The prophet Nathan told David that, as punishment for his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, David's child would die. David's natural and immediate response was to fast and pray in sackcloth, asking God to spare his child's life. Although it is often said that fasting adds extra vitality to our prayers, biblical fasting is not a hunger strike between God and ourselves. In the Bible, fasting is not so much about how God responds to our prayers. It is more about how we prepare ourselves to come before him in prayer and worship. Fasting is a means of humbling ourselves before God.

While the New Testament has little direct teaching about the particulars of fasting, it seems that it was a general and regular practice for Christ and His disciples. Besides Matthew 6:16-18 (discussed above), there are three other important passages

where Jesus Himself fasts or teaches about fasting.

1. Mathew 4:1–2: “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry.” As followers of Christ, the mere fact that Jesus Himself fasted is itself a compelling enough reason for us to make fasting and prayer a regular practice. Jesus undertook this forty-day fast before he was about to enter full-time ministry to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. This period of fasting was an act of consecration to God, undertaken in preparation for His ministry.
2. Mark 2:18-20 (also Matthew 9:14-17 and Luke 5:33-39): “Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?” Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.”

Mark tells us that on this occasion, Jesus and his disciples were compared unfavorably with the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees for not fasting. The answer Jesus’s accusers receive is a picture of a ‘wedding-feast’, a favorite image in the New Testament for the new dispensation that Jesus has inaugurated, where Our Lord Himself is

portrayed as the bridegroom and His disciples as the wedding guests. According to this logic, when Jesus was present, the disciples couldn't fast, since it was a time of joy. But when the bridegroom is taken away, then will be the time for his followers to fast. While Jesus walked the earth, His disciples were present with Him. Now that He is physically absent, Jesus' disciples connect to Him in greater intimacy through fasting.

3. Luke 18:10-14: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give one-tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The Pharisee who prayed in the temple boasted how he fasted twice a week and gave tithes of all he possessed. Next to him was a tax collector who simply cried out to God, "Be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). The Pharisee was not seeking the mercy of God; he was demonstrating his own piety and grandeur vis-à-vis the tax collectors and other

sinners. The tax collector, on the other hand, simply cried out to God, for he knew that he had no power or righteousness on his own and was in need of God's mercy.

This vivid story teaches that fasting is not about being self-sufficient or performing perfectly. It's about coming before God with a humble heart that is open and ready to receive Him.

FASTING IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Like the other ancient Christian traditions, the Armenian Church's liturgical calendar includes prescribed days and seasons for fasting. The Armenian Church's calendar contains 158 fasting days each year, (with 207 feasting days) classified as follows:

The Fast of Great Lent (*Medz Bahk*) and Holy Week (7 weeks). Following the biblical model of a forty-day fast, Great Lent, as in all ancient Christian traditions, precedes the period of the resurrection and revelation of the Lord. In the liturgical tradition of the Armenian Church, every Lenten Sunday bears a symbolic message based on an episode in the Bible, thus constructing a unique golden chain from the garden of Eden to the path to Golgotha and the Resurrection^v.

Weeklong Fasts: There are ten weeklong fasts that precede major feasts and commemorations, observed from Monday to Friday (except for the Fast of the Nativity, which is 6 days):

1. Fast of Nativity/Theophany
2. Fast of the Catechumens (*Arachavorats Bahk*)
3. Fast of Elijah
4. Fast of our Holy Father St. Gregory the Illuminator
5. Fast of Transfiguration
6. Fast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God
7. Fast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross
8. Fast of the Holy Cross of Varak
9. Fast of Advent
10. Fast of St. Jacob of Nisibis

Daily Fast: Every Wednesday and Friday is a day of fasting, except during the forty days after Easter (until Ascension) and during the octave of Theophany (January 6 – 13).

Our Tradition divides the liturgical year into two parts – fasting and feasting days – according to the congruous analogy of body and spirit. The harmonious co-working of spirit and body was a part of man’s original creation. According to the biblical narrative of creation, man is created as a unique synthesis of material and spiritual elements, and as recorded in the New Testament, “...the body without the spirit is dead” (James 2:26). Even after the fall, human nature

did not lose its capacity to harmonize body and spirit. The Christian faith emphasizes not only the spiritual needs of man, but also the physical and the ideal Christian life is one that maintains a harmonious and balanced relation between the spirit and the body. This God-given harmony regulates the forces which move man and shape his character and nature^{vi}. In order to be healed by fasting, man needs to concentrate all his natural forces in a harmonious union of body and spirit. If a faithful being really intends to heal his body and spirit, to seek interior spiritual harmony, he should fast not only as an individual, but also as a member of a praying and fasting community. Therefore, fasting is not only a private matter; its objective is largely interpersonal. Fasting is not just about healing a person, but also the community, the people of God. That is why the Church fathers emphasized this communitarian aspect of fasting. In connection with this, they singled out two primary biblical passages (Esther 4 and Acts 13) where the fasting of community played a decisive role in the realization of God's divine plan.

The fourth chapter of Esther recounts a pivotal exchange between Mordechai, Esther's uncle and Esther. The Persian King and his chief-minister Haman have just issued a decree to annihilate all the Jews in the Persian empire. In order to build up her confidence and strength, Esther asked her people to fast for three days and nights on her behalf and then she would go to the King to intercede for them. These three days of fasting were a national rallying cry for salvation. The whole nation united behind Esther, and God indeed answered their prayers. Achashverosh,

the Persian King of Kings, welcomed Esther when she appeared before him, and this set into motion the events that would bring down Haman and thwart his evil plot against the Jews.

The second passage is in the Book of the Acts of Apostles, when, gathered as the first Christian church in Antioch, the apostles and the first Christians were praying and fasting for the expansion of the Christian Church. The Holy Spirit responded to their prayer-filled fasting: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So, after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2-3).

The Christian church followed the example of other great biblical figures such as Moses (Exodus 34:28), Elijah the Prophet (III Kingdoms [I Kings] 19:8), King David (II Kingdoms [II Samuel] 12:16), Judith (Judith 8:5-6), Anna the Prophetess (Luke 2:37), and others. This is why the church fathers and teachers emphasized the necessity for every Christian to participate in the fasting days, for it strengthens the Church, the mystical body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and heals the entire community. The feeling of lightness, wakefulness, freedom, and joy that accompanies fasting and prayer is how our heart and mind tangibly perceive the blessed presence of our Savior.

FASTING IS NOT ONLY ABOUT ABSTINENCE

Fasting is the foundation of constructing new values in the inner world of a person. Everything which is lowly in the eyes of God must be rejected, and every higher value must be pursued. In our days we run after every new thing: from every new year to every new technology to every new restaurant to every new fad...Indeed, we live in a world enslaved to a vicious cycle of novelty. But our hearts and souls remain hungry, ever more ravenous due to our folly in chasing after every new thing or experience. Fasting leads us to the realization that we do not need newness on the outside but on the inside. We need to be born anew, in the interior reality of the New Being. For this reason, fasting should not be perceived as mere physical deprivation, without any attention to our spiritual needs. It is obvious that the liberating character of fasting is concerned with both the material and spiritual needs of man. When we overlook one of these needs, we shrink away from our duty to make every possible effort to restore and maintain the adequate balance of our inner spiritual world.

Among our faithful, fasting is generally associated with mere abstinence from food. However, this is not a principle in the Armenian Church tradition. What is always of highest importance is the intention and willingness with which one undertakes the fast. When fasting becomes merely a matter of diet, of adhering to external rules about food, it will not necessarily be

of spiritual benefit to us. Fasting can also have different ways of expression, such as abstaining from bad habits and vices. In this sense, Aphrahat, known as “the Persian Sage” (IV c.), one of the teachers of the early Church, has the following to say about fasting: “Indeed my friend, fasting is not only abstaining from bread and water, for there are many ways to undertake a fast. There is the one who abstains from bread and water to the point of being hungry and thirsty, but there is also the one who abstains in order to be a virgin, and who has hunger but does not eat, and has thirst but does not drink. There is also the one who abstains through holiness, for this too is a fast, and there is the one who abstains from meat, from wine, and from certain foods. There is also the one who fasts by building a fence around his mouth, so as to avoid speaking hateful words, and there is the one who abstains from anger, who crushes his desire to get angry so that he might not be conquered by it. There is the one who abstains from property, so that he might free himself for his work, and there is the one who abstains from any kind of bed, in order to remain wide awake in prayer.” (Demonstrations, III)^{vii}.

Divorced from prayer, unaccompanied by acts of compassion and almsgiving, our fasting may become legalistic. This is why the Armenian Church proclaims the beginning of one of the longest fasting periods, Great Lent, with the following profound and poetic verses from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

“Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, and to spread out sack-

cloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast,
And an acceptable day to the Lord?

*Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to
loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the
heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free,
and that you break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and that you bring to your house the poor
who are cast out;*

When you see the naked, that you cover him,
and not hide yourself from your own flesh?

“If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you extend your soul to the hungry
and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light
shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness
shall be as the noonday.

(Isaiah 58:1-14).

The inner dimension of the life of faith is summed up by the prophet Isaiah in these three virtues: *prayer, fasting, and almsgiving*. Biblical fasting is always combined with prayer and divine revelation. When Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34: 28) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (III Kingdoms [I Kings] 19: 8-12), the fast was, in both cases, linked with a revelation of God. The same connection between fasting and the vision of God is evident in the case of St. Peter (Acts 10: 9-17). He “went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet be-

ing let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat". In both the Old and the New Testaments fasting is seen not as an end in itself, but as an aid to more intense prayer, as a preparation for decisive action, or for direct encounter with God. Fasting, then, is valueless or even harmful when not combined with prayer and almsgiving. In the Armenian spiritual tradition, almsgiving, prayer and fasting were described as the most important virtues: "Almsgiving, prayer and fasting, these are the greatest Christian virtues" (Lives and Sayings of Holy Fathers, 10:123). What is the meaning of these virtues? Following the spiritual tradition of the Armenian Church, they could be explained as follows:

-Almsgiving, known also as "philanthropy", is the proper behavior of the believer to her/his fellow brothers and sisters. In other words, it encapsulates the relationship of the faithful with society, according to the principles of Christian spiritual life.

-Prayer is a vivid relation of the believer with God, an endless dialogue in the believer's inner spiritual world.

-Fasting encapsulates all the principles and norms (both physical and spiritual) that the believer is intended to apply for her/his spiritual growth.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FASTING AND REPENTANCE

What is the result of fasting for our spiritual life? Fasting “activates” our feeling of remorse, the starting point of our spiritual life. Without repentance there can be no new life, no salvation, no entry into the Kingdom. It is with the exhortation to repentance that our Lord Jesus Christ began his preaching: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mathew 4:17). This constant emphasis on repentance is heavily underlined in the words and writings of the great spiritual teachers of the Church. Asked what he is doing in the desert, one of the fathers replies, “I came here to weep for my sins.” Repentance is not just a preliminary stage, but lifelong^{viii}.

Repentance is often viewed, especially in the West, as sorrow for sin, a feeling of guilt, a sense of grief at the wounds we have inflicted on others and on ourselves. Yet this view is misleading because it is incomplete. We come closer to the true meaning of repentance when we reflect on the literal sense of the Greek and Armenian terms, *metanoia* and *abashkharutiun*. *Metanoia* means “change of mind,” not just regret for the past, for all we have done, but a total and fundamental transformation of our way of looking at ourselves, at others, and at God. The Armenian word for repentance, *abashkharutiun*, with its derivative *abashavutiun*, stands very close to the Greek “metanoia”. *Abashkharutiun* originally means “changing the way, giving up previous habits”^{ix}. The spiritual meaning

of *abashkharutiun* and *apashavutiun* was beautifully explained by the fifteenth-century Armenian theologian St. Gregory of Datev: “*Abashkharutiun* is contrition for sins committed, i.e. when believers enumerate one by one all their wrongdoings and repent for their sins. As for *apashavel*, it means that people regret [the sins] in their soul... We come closer to God through repentance and prayer. When we repent of our sins, we turn to God with our mind and ask God’s forgiveness for our sins with prayer”^x.

Repentance requires not only reconciliation with the Lord, but also with our fellow brothers and sisters. It is no accident that Holy Thursday is considered a day of mutual reconciliation in the tradition of the Armenian Church, consisting of several prayers and exhortations emphasizing the necessity of reconciliation on the threshold of the Lord’s Resurrection. Without love towards others there can be no genuine fast, per the conviction of the Church. And this love for others should not be limited to formal gestures or sentimental feelings but should be demonstrated in specific acts of almsgiving. The second-century Christian treatise, “Shepherd of Hermas,” insists that the money saved through fasting is to be given to the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Likewise, St. Gregory of Datev considers almsgiving as a kind of prayer, a concrete act of virtue, combined with love and compassion^{xi}. But, as recorded in the biblical story of the Widow’s Offering (Mark 12:41-44), almsgiving means to give not only what we have, but what we are; it is to give not a part of ourselves, but “to put in everything, all we have to live on” (cf. Mark 12:44).

OUR SPIRITUAL “MENU”

The Christian tradition has developed various regulations concerning the time and duration of fasting, methods of practice, kinds of food, etc. From the very beginning of Christian faith in Armenia, a special fasting “menu” developed. The main purpose of this popular practice is to emphasize the major importance of fasting in the routine. But undue emphasis on the selection of proper fasting foods and the duration of the fast threaten to overshadow the main purpose of fasting: the spiritual uprightness that comes from humbling one’s body in obedience to the Will of God. Fasting is not only about selection of foods, or a creative exercise in forming one’s special dietary menu. We also need a “spiritual menu”, a special supply for our spiritual growth.

One of the hymns (*sharagan*) of the Canon for Cheesfare Sunday (*Poon Paregentan*) compares the period of fasting with the paradisaical state of our forefather Adam:

“Today, like Adam the first-formed,
Who in the Paradise of delight
rejoiced with the Angels,
Let us also rejoice as we sing spiritual hymns.
Today, like our first-father created by God,
Who delighted in Eden by eating of its fruits,
Let us also taste of the commandments of God”.

In our understanding of fasting, we often mistake the means for the end. Our words and thoughts about

fasting can become focused on the question of what to eat or not eat. It is important to remember that fasting is also about feeding our spirit with the commandments of God. If we ignore this, we will become a roaming traveler without any precise destination and itinerary. The spiritual tablets of our inner world should be full of the life-giving words of the Scriptures, the deep exhortations of the Church fathers, the prayers of St. Gregory of Nareg, and the spiritual canticles of St. Nerses Shnorhali. During our periods of fasting, it would be wise to memorize passages from the texts just mentioned and chew upon them in our minds and hearts as we go about our day.

If we become proud of our abstention from foods, in that very moment we lose the possibility of living in the kingdom of heaven. St. Paul describes the kingdom of God with these words: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). While fasting, we ought to enter into the deeper meaning of the Word of God. We can identify ourselves with biblical heroes in order to share in their amazing spiritual experience. The effects of such a spiritual “menu” in our life are very simple: *repentance, forgiveness, with joyous tears and happiness.*

Fasting is a life-long adventure, a spiritual journey. We begin with abstinence and hard effort in order to arrive at the Gates of Heaven, as described by St. Gregory of Nareg: “And having sown these words tearfully and set forth on this path toward the dwellings You have prepared, may I arrive joyfully in the time of harvest with the return of the bounty of atonement, with the blessed fruit of the goodly sheaves” (Book of Prayers, 2:2).

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Cover Image: Last Supper of Christ, miniature from the ca 1300 Gladzor Gospels (Los Angeles, Charles E. Young Research Library, Armenian 1, p. 156)



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