

# Great Lent – Brief Historical-liturgical Perspective

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## **Abstract:**

*Lent is the period preceding the Easter feast which lasts forty days; the time of repentance by excellence and the return to God, which reminds us first of all of the forty days spent by the Savior in the wilderness of Carantania (Luke 4, 2), right after Baptism. It is the period during which the catechumens would spend the last forty days of their proper preparation for receiving Baptism at Easter. The 40-day passover of Easter is based on an old-testament tradition, attested several times. In the Eastern tradition, fasting has always had a deep spiritual character, aiming in particular, what the Holy Fathers would call “metanoia”, the profoundly inner change of man. That is why, the fasting in general, but especially the Great Lent, calls for terrible skill. The true spirit of the Great Lent is found, however, in the time of repentance established by the Church for all its sons, irrespective of the spiritual stage, for a period of forty days.*

**Keywords:** *Lent, fasting, Păresimi (the fortieth part), Easter, Church, catechumen, Baptism, ordinance, Christianity*

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## **1. The Notion of “Fasting” in the Christian Vision**

Fasting is one of the church ordinances through which the Church guides the lives of its believers on the way of true living, virtue and God’s glory. Christianity has given fasting a special significance within the religious life, especially the monastic life, making it an act of virtue and worship, a means of progressing in spiritual life, of fighting against passions and lust (See a synthesis of the “Christian fasting purpose” at Pavel 1977: 431). However, fasting constitutes in itself the most obvious sign of respect and submission to God. In Christian conception, fasting is the ultimate effort for the renewal of life through the enthronement of the supremacy of the spirit over the body and the soul. This endeavor is based on an immutable struggle, which consists in the strengthening of will and healthy reason, in disciplining the instincts, in defeating the soul, aiming

at the realization of the inner equilibrium in which the spirit, that is the superior and noble part of the human being, predominates.

## 2. Fasting in primary Christianity

There are no exact prescriptions concerning the duration and forms of practicing fasting during primary Christianity [“At the beginning there were no precise and binding prescriptions regarding the moment, duration and severity of fasting”] (Zăgrean and Necula 1979: 183). The early Christians probably fasted according to the Jewish custom, although the Christian Church did not adopt any of the Old Testament fasting traditions (Braniște 1993: 246). This seems to explain brilliantly, one of the quite disputed points of view in the field of the Liturgy, namely the influence of the Jewish cult on the Christian one. The one who would categorically affirm that the idea of this influence should be “abandoned” is Father Robert Taft (*La liturgia delle ore in oriente e occidente. Le origini dell’ufficio divino e il suo significato per oggi* 2001: 20). In terms of Christian fasting, its origin, structure, and especially its spiritual significance, we want to point out that it is the creation of the Christian genius altogether, being cultivated and perfected in the monastic tradition, and then accepted by the whole Church. If, at the beginning, the post was practiced as an act of personal piety, which was based on the freedom and religious zeal of every Christian, in time, the church authority has formulated more or less precise rules and guidelines, thus establishing the time, duration, and manner of fasting. These rules would emerge after the 4th century, along with the regulation of the catechumenate and penitentiary discipline, but especially with the completion of the organization of the Church.

## 3. Great Lent, the “Păresimi” or “Fortieth”

Great Lent, the *Păresimi* [“PĂRESIMI – A popular term for Easter; Fortieth, the forty days of this fasting period (*quadragesima*)”] (Braniște and Braniște 2001: 360) or Fortieth, that is, the fast before the Lord's Resurrection is the most severe [“Fasting the st. fortieth, which, unlike the other yearly fastings, is called the first or the great fasting, is harsher than

the others; and, then, fasting the passion week is harsher than fasting the fortieth”] (Mitrofanovici 1909: 172) and the longest of the four fasting periods of the Orthodox Church. It is also one of the most intense liturgical time of our Church as well as of other Christian Churches. In general, it is named in the Great Lent or the Great Forty Days. The name of Păresimi [„The Romanian people call this fasting period “păresimi” from “quadragesima” that is 40 days”] (Cireșanu vol. III, 1912: 392, note 4) or Fortieth (“Τεσσαρακοστή” in Greek and “Quadragesima” in Latin), which is found for the first time in Canon 5 of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325) [“CANON 5: (METROPOLITAN COUNCILS) (...) **And the Councils should be held one before the Fortieth...**”] (Floca 1992: 54; Popescu 1930: 523; Braniște 1993: 255), Would be perfectly justifiable for the six weeks that were formerly the Great Lent or the Fortieth ( $6 \times 7 = 42$  days); as a matter of fact, it was considered to be concluded in the Lazarus Friday (Friday before Palm) [“At the end of the third century and the beginning of the 4th century, the fasting before Easter grew longer and broke into two parts: Lent or the Fortieth, before Palm Sunday, and Great Lent, during the passion week with great harshness”] (Popovici 1934: 365), while Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday were considered special feasts ( $42 - 2 = 40$  zile). At the end of the fourth century, the Great Lent, which began on Sunday (1 day) and lasted five whole weeks ( $5 \times 7 = 35$  days), ended on Maundy Thursday (another 4 days), so exactly a total of forty days. This rule is found nowadays in the Ambrosian rite [“... *Liturgical rites* – Resulting from the diversification of the Uniform Liturgy in the first three centuries, from which the Liturgies would gradually develop later...”] (Braniște and Braniște 2001: 411). The 40 days of the Păresimi symbolize first of all the forty days spent by the Savior Jesus Christ in the wilderness of Carantania (Luke 4, 2), immediately after Baptism, that is, before coming to preaching (Cireșanu vol. III, 1912: 392-393). The practice of the “fortieth” was adopted by the Christian Church before the 4th century; it was, in fact, the catechumen’s preparation time for baptism [“It is quite reasonable that the fasting before the Easter has lasted for up to 40 days in connection with the catechumen catechizing, which were customarily baptized on Easter day. This catechization was extended to 40 days”] (Popovici 1934: 366). But starting with the fourth century, the catechumenal character of the

“fortieth” was increasingly replaced with the penitentiary character, then under the influence of monasticism, the entire Christian Church accepted the “vestment of repentance”.

#### 4. Biblical Grounds on the Length of Great Lent

A particular role in determining and fixing the length of Great Lent has probably had the number 40 appearing in the Old Testament (Gavrilă 1999: 12) several times. The main events involving this number would be the following [Among the names of the liturgical studies could be numbered the so-called fasting of “ten days” of the Holy Prophet Daniel and the Three Young Men: Ananias, Misael, and Azariah (*cf.* Daniel 1, 12.14.15); The Sinaxar from the Cheese-fare Sunday also remembers the fasting of St. Daniel the Prophet] (*Triodion* 2000: 106; Braniște 1993: 253; “... Daniil in Babylon fasted for three weeks (Daniil X, 2=3)” Palade 1972: 68):

- the forty days of the flood (Genesis 7, 4.12.17; 8, 6) (Makarios from Simonopetra translated by Ică jr. 2003: 276; Gavrilă 1999: 12);
- the forty days spent by Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24, 18; Deuteronomy 9, 9.11.18.25; 10, 10) (Braniște 1993: 106);
- the forty days in which the Jewish spies searched the land of Canaan where they would enter (Numbers 13, 26);
- the forty days spent by St. Elijah the Prophet to reach Mount Horeb (3 Kings 19, 8);
- the forty days God offers the people of Nineveh to repent (Jonah 3, 4) (Braniște 1993: 12).

There are some key passages in the New Testament where the number of forty days is mentioned:

- the forty days spent by the Savior in the wilderness of Carantania (Matthew 4, 2; Mark 1, 13; Luke 4, 2) (Cireșanu vol. III, 1912: 392-393; Braniște 1993: 255);
- the forty days from the Resurrection to the Ascension, during which the Savior gives the Holy Apostles the last teachings (Acts 1, 3) (Makarios from Simonopetra translated by Ică jr. 2003: 267).

One last important clue would be the forty years spent by the people of Israel in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 2, 7; 29, 5) (Makarios from

Simonopetra translated by Ică jr. 2003: 276; Gavrilă 1999: 12-13 (Note that the biblical references are not accurately rendered)). The symbolism of this period is a powerful one, and it certainly represents the time when God is trying the loyalty of the sons of Israel to rebirth a new generation of His faithful.

### **5. “The Fasting of the Păresimi” and the “Great Lent”**

The Holy Fathers and church writers regard Great Lent as an institution of apostolic origin [“b). *Postul Paștilor (the Păresimi)* (...) This fasting is regarded by the Holy Fathers of the Church as an establishment of apostolic origin”] (Palade 1972: 75; see also Braniște 1964: 131). What is very clear to most of the liturgists is that, in the first three centuries, the duration and type of the liturgy were not uniform everywhere [“If during the first three centuries the duration and manner of fasting were varied (some fasted only in the Holy Friday, others - two or three days, some - a week, and others - seven - in the West or eight weeks - at Jerusalem”] (Gavrilă 1999: 12). The end of the third century is the time when the Great Lent will be divided into two distinct periods and with different names: “The Fasting of the Păresimi” (Fortieth) or the prepascal fasting (Gavrilă 1999: 12), which lasted until Palm Sunday, with a variable duration and the “Great Lent” or the pascal fasting (Gavrilă 1999: 12), which lasted a week, i.e. Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. It was only after the Gregorian reform, which was decided at the First Ecumenical Synod (Nicaea, 325), the Eastern Church would definitively adopt the old Antiochian practice of Great Lent of seven weeks. According to the Orthodox rule, the final day of pre-Lent is the Forgiveness Sunday and the fast lasts until the Holy Saturday, inclusively [“Regarding *the moment when the Great Lent begins and its duration*, the holy Church decided that it would begin on Monday after the Forgiveness Sunday (Cheesefare Sunday (!)) and end in the Easter night, at Resurrection, lasting thus, seven weeks”] (Pîrvu 1958: 231).

## **6. Great Lent - Short Historical Perspective**

In Christian Church of the first centuries, the Easter feast was anticipated by one or two days of fasting [“Regarding the length of this fasting period (Great Lent, author’s emphasis), At the beginning it was not the same everywhere: some had the day before the Resurrection, others a few days, up to a week”] (Zăgrean and Necula 1979: 184). These two days of fasting seem to have been established not so much to celebrate the Lord’s Resurrection, but especially for the catechumens to receive Baptism in the Easter night, moment which in time will crystallize itself [“In the first three centuries, that period coincided with the period of preparation for those who believed in Christ and wished to be baptized – the catechumens – who were to be baptized just at Easter; However, in time when the category of catechumens disappeared, fasting lost this characteristic, remaining, by excellence, a penitential fasting, a fasting of repentance”] (Gavrilă 1999: 13). So the practice of fasting would be firstly reserved for the catechumens, and then extended to the Baptism ceremony and eventually to the entire Church. This incipient form of fasting had no penitential character, but rather an ascetic-illuminator one. Also during the period of the early Church in Rome, the Sunday before Easter was also called “Passion Sunday”, and on Wednesday and Friday of this week, the Divine Liturgy was not performed. Extending the fast to the entire week before Easter was initially a liturgical practice specific to the Alexandrian Church. Also, during the three weeks before Easter, In the early Church were read passages from the Gospel of John, Since it was very rich in passages related both to the nearness of Easter and the work of the Savior Jesus Christ at Jerusalem. The preparation time would be motivated, at the beginning, by the penitential practice [“In the old times by fasting, all were preparing, those who were to receive baptism, and through it the sinners were cleansed of sin”] (Moisescu 1909: 37), because the penitentiaries were subject to a period of intensive training of forty days. Hence, the term “Fortieth”. They went through this period of fasting, according to the Old Testament prescriptions, that is to say, wearing garments made from sackcloth and covering their heads with ashes, as a sign of profound repentance and as a spiritual exercise. It is astonishingly noteworthy that in the life of the Church, in the first three centuries, there was no preparation for Easter, since the Christian

community lived so intensely the Christian creed, most of the times even to the extent of martyrdom, that the need for a period of time to renew the promises of Baptism was not felt. In the fourth century, however, the only week of fasting was the one before Easter [“From the 4th century we have evidence that this fasting period (Great Lent, author’s emphasis) was of 40 days and then of 6 weeks, then to be fixed at 7 weeks (49 days), the last week, called Passion Week, being considered as a special, more severe fasting, linked to the Easter of the Crucifixion”] (Zăgrean and Necula 1979: 184). The official provisions regulating the discipline of fasting would be uniformly and definitively fixed all over the world, only in the era preceding the great schism (VIII-IX centuries), thus crystallizing the order of fasting and abstention (Branîște 1993: 247). The one who would note, in writing, details of the discipline of fasting in the “primary” church would be the church historian Socrates (380-450).

### **7. Lenten Triodion’s Hymnography - The “Key” to understanding Great Lent**

In the Eastern tradition, fasting has always had a profound spiritual character, especially following what the Holy Fathers would call “metanoia” [“For Byzantine hymnographers, Great Lent is first and foremost «the time of repentance» (*ho kairos tes metanoias*)” and “The virtues to which we are called by the great hymnographers of the Triodion focus essentially on repentance (*metanoia*)”] (Makarios from Simonopetra translated by Ică jr. 2003: 64 and 385), that is, the profoundly inner change of man. Such an understanding of fasting, especially of the Great Lent, is reproduced masterfully by the Byzantine imografia, so beautiful and penetrating, contained in the Lenten Triodion. Unfortunately, today, there are very few who notice the depth of the sense of fasting in general, of the Great Lent in particular, reducing it only to some less or more essential rules. According to Father Alexander Schmemmann, the tragedy of this misunderstanding of the Great Lent is due to the ignorance of the Lenten Triodion:

*Lenten Triodion’s* ignorance is the main cause of slow development towards a true understanding of fasting, its purposes and meanings - a development that is slowly taking place in the Christian mentality and that reduces fasting to a legal “obligation” and a set of dietary rules. The true discovery and preoccupation of

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fasting is almost lost today and there is no other way closer to its rediscovery than by careful listening to the songs of *Lenten Triodion* (Schmemmann translated by Stroe and Constantin 1995: 44).

### **8. The Spiritual Dimension of the Great Lent**

The services of the Great Lent have preserved to this day their catechetical and baptismal character, being not only mere vestiges of the past, but the pure source from which Orthodoxy fills itself, to appease its thirst and need for perfection, always present. Every year, fasting and Easter are, once again, our rediscovery and restoration of the original state we have been raised by our own death and resurrection in Baptism. Great Lent can also be understood as “the right day” of salvation (2 Corinthians 6, 2) about which the Apostle Paul speaks, as the time of repentance [“The Great Lent is not the period of repentance as we often say very often, but, the period that accentuates the state of repentance and makes people aware of the importance and role of repentance”] (Gavrilă 1999: 19) and return to Christ. But as we have already mentioned, the spiritual dimension of fasting is the mood or, why not, the “art” of careful and long listening of the Word of God, since this Word is the One Who enlightens us and leads us to recognize first of all our own sins. Reconciliation with the others, as well as the central idea of genuine repentance, which also acquires external valences, is in reality the return to oneself, but especially the encounter of the other. If reconciliation with the neighbor is the foundation of true repentance, forgiveness is the key that opens the way to fasting, which the Church asks us to do in Forgiveness Sunday or “cheese fare” day, in the evening, during the Vespers of “Forgiveness”. We enter the *Păresimi* and go through the path of fasting, reconciled with others and with God, always having the consciousness of our smallness and the thought of not hurting others. Why this consciousness of humility? To regain true ascension to the Resurrection. The genuine spirit of the Great Lent is found, therefore, in the time of the repentance established by the Church for all its sons, regardless of the spiritual stage, for a period of forty days.



### **9. The Skill of Fasting**

We ask why there is a need for the skill of fasting and which are actually its rationale? In the vision of our Church, the first man, Adam, would lose in heaven this very skill, namely fasting [“The first commandment given to Adam in heaven was that of “fasting”, that is to say, to control his lust and not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”] (Makarios from Simonopetra translated by Ică jr. 2003: 94 (see also p. 427, note 56)) [“So I suffered so much, because Adam did not fast one time. That is why, at the beginning of the holy Lent of forty days, it is now the remembrance of Adam, so that, reminding of the great evil that brought Adam’s fail to fast, to endeavor to receive fasting with great joy and to keep it to gain with its help what Adam did not achieve, that is, deification”] (*Triodion* 2000: 106). Therefore, the Holy Fathers, as good connoisseurs of divine purposes, would determine the beginning of fasting, especially the Great Lent, not by chance, after “Forgiveness Sunday” [“And Adam shows that fasting is good in that he was driven out of heaven because he did not fast. For this reason, the remembrance of the expulsion of Adam from heaven was placed at the beginning of the fasting”] (*Triodion* 2000: 106). In other words, the meaning of fasting in general, but especially the Great Lent, requires a certain ability (skill), being the time in which and through which, the Church puts before its sons the image of repentance, but also the means of its realization, since the path of sin and sacrifice is not easy to change at all. It is necessary from time to time for certain days or periods of fasting, in which the spiritual struggle with the bodily and soul passions is strengthened and intensified by a conscious and harsh battle of the body, for it to become an effective means of achieving spiritual aspirations and to ascend to God, the perfect source and incarnation of Good (Braniște 1993: 245). The goal of fasting is also to release the man from the proud mastery of the flesh, to take the spirit out of the tyranny of his body and his lusts, tragic result of sin and the primordial fall of man. Only through a long and persistent effort will man discover that “he shall not live by bread alone” (Luke 4, 4) and he will understand that only thus he can restore the primacy of the spirit. This primacy implies a long and sustained effort through its intimate structure. Time is essential because it is needed to root out and cure the generalized disease that people have come to regard as their

“normal” state. The skill of fasting was long cultivated and perfected in the monastic tradition, and then accepted by the whole Church. It is the human experimentation of the words of Christ, which says that the devilish powers who enslaved man can only be overcome by “prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17, 21). It has its origin in the example of Christ Himself, Who fasted for forty days, then met Satan face to face. In a providential way, this encounter would change the inclination of man towards “bread alone” (Luke 4, 4) and would inaugurate his release.

### **10. Great Lent - “Journey towards Easter”**

In the vision of the Church, the Great Lent has always represented the spiritual journey whose destination is Easter Schmemmann translated by Stroe and Constantin 1995: 11; see also Farcașiu 2013: 5) – “feast of feasts and celebration of celebrations” (*Penticostar* 1988<sup>7</sup>: 23). This journey has its deepest reason in that, between the Păresimi and Easter it is an indissoluble link that only an exact and spiritual understanding of both. Because of the weakness of our nature and the impossibility of living steadily, we are scattering and forgetting too soon that the Resurrection of Christ, this unique event, is actually the only thing that makes sense and fills our lives. That is why the Orthodox Church, through its solid and authentic liturgical traditions, through well-defined liturgical services and moments, seeks to help us rediscover and sincerely desire the new and true life, which we so easily scatter and overlook, that is, Christ - the “Great Holy Easter” (*Penticostar* 1988<sup>7</sup>: 24), Whom we will share more truthfully “on the day we enter His Kingdom” (*Penticostar* 1988<sup>7</sup>: 24).

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