

# Fasting and Hospitality in Community

## Part 2 of a Lenten Retreat

Saint Vladimir Seminary  
First Week of Great Lent 2020

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

This morning, I reflected a bit in general on the asceticism of community life and noted that it is bound up in two poles: myself and my fellows. How do I balance my own desires and wishes with those of my fellows? In many ways, we find the balance to those large issues in the same way that we balance our life in smaller ways. Our Orthodox Christian way is one of maximalism: seeking to purify our hearts, to overcome our passions, to become united with Christ. Even the effort to attain this is sometimes exhausting: we have to be patient with others, forgiving of their faults, we need to bear with their criticism and idiosyncrasies; we have to show love when we don't really feel that love.

On top of that, we come now to the season of Great Lent where we are asked to dedicate all our remaining energy to extra services, unending prostrations, and rigorous fasting. In all this ascetical striving, it is good to remember that there is an asceticism of rest and retreat. Retreat need not be taken as a defeat in the military sense of a platoon of soldiers retreating in the face of more powerful enemies. Rather rest is something that is necessary for our spiritual well-being. During the Six Psalms at matins, we hear the words of the Psalmist: *I lay down and slept. I awoke, for the Lord will help me.* Sometimes we can more directly receive God's help, not when

we are charging at Him, but rather when we pull back and allow him to visit us.

So rest is an ascetical exercise as we hear in the following well-known passage from the sayings of Abba Anthony the Great:

A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him, "Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it." So he did. The old man then said, "Shoot another," and he did so. Then the old man said, "Shoot yet again," and the hunter replied "If I bend my bow so much I will break it." Then the old man said to him, "It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs." When he heard these words the hunter was pierced by compunction and, greatly edified by the old man, he went away. As for the brethren, they went home strengthened. (Saying 13)

To live in community, one has to know when to pull the bow and shoot, and when to relax the bow and rest. The realities of life, the passions of others, and our own passions make this challenging. But again, it is often in the midst of those very challenges that we find discernment and even grace. We cannot discern when to be alert and when to relax if we don't have a handle on how we approach our life in Christ.

Let us take the examples of fasting, hospitality, and obedience, all of which are personal efforts we each make individually, but which become more challenging when we exercise them in community. My first meal on the Holy Mountain was at the Monastery of Koutloumoussiou. It was a Sunday during the Nativity Fast, so after many hours of vigil, concluding with the

Divine Liturgy, it was time (at 8:00 am) for the common meal: a bowl of rice and a bowl with a single octopus tentacle. This meager meal was made more appetizing by the hospitality offered -- to this young American who was not prepared to eat squid at 8:00 am in the morning -- by the Abbot of the monastery, who did not speak to me, but who looked at me with deep eyes which were at once joyful and sorrowful.

On the other extreme, I recorded the following when I made my way to the Romanian Skete of the Forerunner. This skete is as large as many of the large monasteries, but it retains the title of skete. In any case, I wrote: "The Romanians eat more than anywhere else I've been on this visit, but they are the only monastery where I saw the monks helping the workers." And indeed, while most other monasteries employed construction workers from Greece and other European countries to help in the endless repairs and construction that was taking place on Athos at the time, the Romanian monks actually did that heavy work themselves. And so their generous portions at the trapeza were justified and even necessary. So there is the need to find the right measure with fasting, and often that is discerned through the community itself.

We all require discernment to help us to navigate the treacherous waters of the spiritual life whether we live in a monastery or not. All of us are now in the season of strict fasting of Great Lent, and the various rules and guidelines for fasting have the potential both to bolster our life of prayer and to cause tension within our families and communities. In the monastic life, for example, it is traditional to fast from meat at all times. But there is also an unwritten rule that if a monastic is served meat, he should eat it

because the law of love is higher than the law of fasting. When is right to exercise the first? When is it right to exercise the former? Consider the following story from the desert fathers, which might shed some light on such dilemmas:

"It happened that several fathers went to the house of a friend of Christ, and among them was Abba Poemen. During the meal, meat was served and everyone ate except Abba Poemen. The other fathers knew his discretion and they were surprised that he did not eat the meat. When they got up, they said to him: "You are Poemen, and yet you behaved like this?" [in other words - you know better than everyone else that you should eat what is placed in front of you] The Elder answered: "Forgive me, my fathers, you have eaten and no one is shocked, but if I had eaten, since many brothers come to me, they would have suffered harm, for they would have said, Poemen has eaten meat, why should we not eat it ourselves?" So they admired his discernment."<sup>1</sup>

We see how important it is to use discernment especially when we begin to speak about rules. It is important to preserve love, and to remain free, of course, but we need to do this with care, because love can easily turn to self-love and freedom can easily turn to self-will. Once again, our measure needs to be Christ, which we find when we see how faithfully we are following the commandments. It is in community – in an actual encounter with other people and in other circumstances – that we are able to find that measure. Abba Poemen needed to care not only for his host and the brothers that were with him, but also the brothers who were not with him at the time, yet looked to him for guidance.

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<sup>1</sup>Ward, Benedicta, *The Desert Christian: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1975), p. 190.

One general way to help us find our measure is to remember that the Holy Fathers always counsel moderation in the exercise of our ascetical practices. Here again, we can take the example of the saints. The fathers had many different practices. Some would fast for many days, weeks or even years.

Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen, 'How should one fast?' Abba Poemen said to him, 'For my part, I think it is better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as to be satisfied.' Abba Joseph said to him, 'When you were younger, did you not fast two days at a time, Abba?' The old man said, 'Yes, even for three days and four and the whole week. The fathers tried all this out as they were able and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is light.'<sup>2</sup>

This story and the earlier one from Abba Poemen reveal the interconnectedness of ascetical practices and the importance of the commandments – and how we exercise them in community – in discerning the best way to put our asceticism into practice. It is good to admire the feats of the saints but it is also good to be honest about where we are, and this “we” includes not just myself, but my brothers and sisters, or my parents and children. Perhaps a more sure way to find this honest assessment is to hear the word of Saint Silouan the Athonite, who advises: "It is my belief that one must eat just so much that after a meal one feels like praying -- eat in such wise that one's spirit perpetually burns and reaches out insatiably towards God, day and night."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Desert Christian, page 171.

<sup>3</sup> *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, p. 499.

In speaking of fasting, one can naturally move onto the subject of hospitality, a not insignificant part of our Lenten journey, which is not limited to physical feats of abstinence but also requires active offerings of Christian love and care.

There is a saying of Abba James who says: "It is better to receive hospitality than to offer it."<sup>4</sup> Why does he say this? Is it not a contradiction to the Lord's word that it is better to give than to receive? If that commandment to offer hospitality is taken only in the external aspect, it is correct. But Abba James shows us what Christ Himself wants to teach us: that if we get stuck on the outward fulfilling of the commandments, then we get in trouble. In this case, why is Abba saying that it is better to accept hospitality than to offer it?

To offer hospitality or to receive it both require a certain degree of humility and obedience and a willingness to say: "I will do what you like." We know this from our own experience. Perhaps we know someone that we don't particularly care for, but we know that we should invite them over because that is the commandment. If we do that, then we feel good that we have done a good deed, and if we don't do that, we feel guilty, but maybe not too bad, since we really don't want to spend time with that person anyway. And if that person invites us over to their house, we don't feel guilty at all for refusing, because we are not breaking any commandment. But if we search our heart, we know that we are, in fact, breaking the commandment, and we know then that what Abba James says is true: for if we would accept the other person's invitation, then we would be making an effort to humble

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<sup>4</sup>Ward, p. 104.

ourselves and in that humbling of ourselves, we would be following the commandment of Christ.

In all these examples, we have seen that while the external expression of asceticism is important, it is the inner disposition of our heart that ultimately shows whether we are close to Christ. For this reason, Saint Paul writes: *Bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come* (I Timothy 4:8). Similar expressions are offered by many other fathers, such as Saint Isaac the Syrian who writes that "psalmody is the root of the ascetic discipline. Know also that psalmody recited with a wandering mind is more profitable than labour of the body."<sup>5</sup>

In all of these matters, I would like to simply draw our attention to a certain principle of the spiritual life: that ultimately we are seeking an honest approach to ourselves, an honest approach to our fellows, and above all, an honest approach to God. We have amazing treasures in the Church: gifts of theology, of wisdom, and of communion with Christ. But none of these gifts will mean anything if our heart is not open to receiving them and sharing them. And this requires both honesty and obedience.

I will speak more on obedience in the next session of this retreat but I will leave you with these words from a monk from Iveron monastery during one of my pilgrimages:

He said:

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<sup>5</sup> ISAAC THE SYRIAN, *Ascetical Homilies*, 64, page 308.

“The monastery should be like a family, not like an institution or an army. Rules are sometimes useful at the beginning, but as a monk makes spiritual progress, there can be more freedom. Father V. (the Abbot) himself has changed over the years. In the past, he would be more strict with the monks about church attendance and such things. But now he leaves them with more freedom. He doesn’t punish them but says that the monks’ life is punishment enough. All Christians are called to deification – but if someone refuses this, then through their egoism they are already suffering the torments of hell.”

Ultimately, a retreat such as this is an opportunity to remind ourselves of what we are doing with our Christian life. The goal is precisely to live that Christian life, not necessarily to become a good monk. It is said of Archimandrite Vasileos of the Holy Mountain that he would go to his monks and ask them: “Are you a good monk or a bad monk?” to see what they would answer. Once, not having received a satisfactory answer, he asked one monk: ‘Who is the best monk?’ and he replied: “You are.” Then Father Vasileos asked him: “Who is the worst monk?” After thinking a while, the monk answered him: “You are” and Father Vasileos was pleased with that answer.

All this to say that Orthodoxy is not an ideology but life and our goal is not to become something but rather to live an authentic life. May we all attain to this authentic and honest life by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.