Pure Wednesday

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"Not by refraining from food alone shall we fulfill the Fast, but by avoiding every bodily passion.... Having risen to the heights of virtue in glory and in the delight of heroic deeds, we shall please the Lover of Mankind."

Vespers for Pure Wednesday: Aposticha, Sticheron

According to Byzantine Catholic tradition, the discipline for the Great Fast is composed of three divisions. The first is the *corporal* or *external fast* which includes abstaining from certain foods, beverages, and amusements. The second one deals with a *spiritual* or an *internal fast* from all evil—sin. And the third division is a *spiritual renewal* which is achieved by the practice of the virtues and charitable deeds.

The *corporal fast* developed primarily under the influence of monastic discipline. For instance, Saint Theodore the Studite gives the following advice: "With respect to the quantity and quality of food, one should fast as much as the body can endure." As we begin our greatfast pilgrimage, the same principal should be applied today inasmuch as our regulations for the Great Fast prescribe only a token and minimal amount of fasting. Additionally, the early Church Fathers insisted on a complete abstinence from all kinds of amusements. This aspect of the Great Fast should be stressed especially today with the mania of entertainment plaguing our youth.

The *spiritual fast* which engenders an abstinence from all evil and serious sin is the most essential part of fasting. Saint John Chrysostom taught that "the value of fasting consists not so much in abstinence from food but rather in withdrawal from sinful practices." He further decried the folly of those Christians who "abstain all day long from food but fail to abstain from sin." The Holy Forty-Days Fast must be seen as a time for repentance during which Christians seek reconciliation with God and expiaton for their sins.

The main objective of our fasting, however, must be a *spiritual renewal* with the practice of virtues—good works. Unfortunately, many individuals replace a genuine spiritual renewal of Christian life with a formal fulfillment of the "Easter Duty." This is extremely lamentable, for it doesn't stress a *metanoia,* a Greek word indicating a sincere "change of heart." Saint John Chrysostom speaks the plain truth in saying: "The Fast is of no advantage to us unless it brings about our spiritual renewal."

As we now begin our spiritual and corporal purification for the greatfast journey to Pascha, let us strive to maintain those ascetical practices that will impel us to have a real *metanoia* and make us worthy of participating in Christ's Holy Resurrection.

SCRIPTURE READINGS: Isaiah 2:3-11
Genesis 1:24 - 2:3
Proverbs 2:1-22