

The Holy Great Fast - Institution and Duration

"Fasting is not a new invention, but a treasure received from the Fathers. All that is ancient is worthy of praise. Respect the antiquity of fasting! It is as old as man himself." (St. Basil, On Fasting I)

The Great Holy Fast, called also the Forty Days Fast, is one of the oldest and most sacred Christian practices. The history of the Great Fast is long and rich in tradition, dating from Apostolic times. The pre-paschal fast is called Great, not only because of its duration but also because of its significance in the life of the Church and of every Christian.

The Fathers of the Church have the greatest respect and the highest praises for the holy fast. Regarding its antiquity, St. Basil (329-379) wrote: 'Allow me again to appeal to history and to recall that fasting is very old and that all the saints observed it as though it were an inheritance from parents, transmitted from father to son. Thus did this treasure come down to us as an unbroken tradition.' (On Fasting I)

Let us examine the development and duration of this spiritual treasure of the Church.

How Did the Pre-Paschal Fast Develop?

From Apostolic times, the Apostles and the first Christian community began to replace the day of the Jewish Passover with that of the commemoration of the passion and death of our Lord. For them, the anniversary of the death of Christ was a very sad day, so to celebrate it worthily, they fasted on that day. Thus the original celebration of the Christian Pasch (Passover) began with a fast. This was the Pasch of the crucifixion. According to the testimony of St. Irenaeus (125-203), which the Church historian, Eusebius (260-340) mentions, the present Forty Days Fast can be traced back to a time when fasting was restricted to one or two days. This fast was not regarded as a pre-paschal fast but as the Pasch itself. According to this testimony some kept the Paschal fast for one day, others for two, others even more, and some fasted forty hours. (History of the Church, 5,24)

In post-apostolic times the Church of the second and third centuries began to attend not only to the sad anniversary of the death of Christ, but also to the joyful anniversary of His Resurrection, so that along with the Pasch of the Crucifixion, the Pasch of the Resurrection with the elimination of the paschal fast slowly gained prominence. Even in apostolic times some had already begun to abandon the fast on the very day of the Jewish Pasch (Passover), and others on the following Sunday. According to the testimony of the historian Socrates (379-440), those who celebrated the Pasch together with the Jews, that is, on the fourteenth day of Nisan, affirmed that this had been handed down to them by the Apostles and the evangelist St. John; those who celebrated the feast of the Pasch on the Sunday following the Jewish Pasch, maintained that they had received this custom from Sts. Peter and Paul. "Neither one," remarks Socrates, "can produce any written documents to confirm their positions." (History of the Church, 5,22)

From this disputes arose between those who celebrated the Pasch with the Jews and those who celebrated it the following Sunday. These long disputes were finally resolved by the Council of Nicea (325).

The canonical documents, of the third century speak of the time when the paschal fast ended. According to the canons of Hippolytus, the solemn conclusion of the fast took place at the dawn of Resurrection Day; according to the Didascalia, at the third hour of the night; and according to the Apostolic Constitutions, at cock-crow.

The Duration of the Great Fast

In the third century, the pre-paschal fast in some Churches lasted for a whole week, the week that today we call Passion Week. Toward the end of the third century the Great Fast had been extended to forty days. The first clear testimonies concerning the forty days pre-paschal fast date from the fourth century. The first testimony is presented to us by the Council of Nicea, which states that local synods should convene "once before the Forty Days Fast, so that after removing all disorders, a pure gift may be offered to God, and they should convene one other time in the autumn." (can. 5)

Although in the fourth century the Forty Days Fast became a recognized practice, nevertheless, it is not yet clearly defined, nor is it generally accepted. In certain places a fast still is observed which falls between the ancient short fast and the Forty Days Fast, namely, the twenty-day fast. This fast was observed, especially in the West, where the Forty Days Fast appeared at a much later date than in the East.

Referring to the duration of the fast before the Pasch (Easter) in various countries, the historian Socrates, reports: "The fast before the Pasch is observed variously in localities; namely, in Rome, before the Pasch the faithful fast for three weeks, except Saturdays and Sundays. In Illyrium, throughout all Greece and Alexandria they fast for six weeks before Easter and this is called the Forty Days Fast. In other places, the people fast seven weeks before the feast of the Pasch." (History of the Church. 5,22)

In Egypt, important testimony regarding the gradual transition from the short fast to the Forty Days Fast is found in the paschal letters of St. Athanasius the Great (c. 297-373). In 329, in the first of these letters, he does not specifically mention the Forty Days Fast but speaks only of the beginning of the "holy fast" associated with the Monday of Passion Week. In the eleventh paschal letter of 340 written in Rome and addressed to bishop Serapion of Thmuis, who in the absence of St. Athanasius had governed the Church in Egypt, St. Athanasius gives the following instruction: "Notify the brethren regarding the Forty Days Fast and at the same time instruct them that when the whole world fasts, we alone, who live in Egypt should not expose ourselves to ridicule by not fasting, but rather rejoicing during that time." In the nineteenth letter of 346, St. Athanasius speaks of the observance of the Forty Days Fast as an indispensable condition for a worthy celebration of the Pasch (Easter): "He who neglects the Forty Days Fast and enters without reflecting the holy of holies with an impure heart, he does not celebrate the feast of the Pasch."

Wherever the custom of the six week fast was in practice, it began on the Monday of the second week of our present day Fast. At the time this practice prevailed, the first week of the Forty Days Fast had not yet become an integral part of the fast.

According to an ancient tradition of the Eastern Church, Saturdays and Sundays were not regarded as fast days. Therefore, so that the total number of fast days would be forty, the fast was extended from six to seven weeks. By the end of the fourth century the pre-paschal fast or Forty Days Fast had already become an accepted practice in both the Eastern and Western Churches.

Is the Number "40" to be Taken Literally or Symbolically

Although we speak of a "forty day fast", nevertheless in the Eastern Church this forty day fast lasts only thirty-six and a half days. Seven weeks of fast, excluding Saturdays and Sundays, leaves only thirty-five days. To this number Holy Saturday and half the night before Easter must be added. But this still leaves thirty-six and a half days of fast which constitutes one tenth of the whole year.

The Latin Church has a six week fast, including Saturdays, so that even in the West the Quadragesima (or Forty Days Fast) consisted of only thirty-six days. Therefore, in order to have a full forty days fast, the Latin Church in the seventh century added still another four days to the beginning of the fast. The Latin Church therefore, begins her fast on "Ash Wednesday", that is, the Wednesday of our first week of the fast.

From ancient times the number "40", like the numbers 3, 7 and 9, was regarded as having a symbolic meaning, and it is in the symbolic rather than the literal sense that "40" days of the pre-paschal fast must be understood. In the Old Testament we read about the Flood which lasted for 40 days (Gen. 7,4), the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness (Nm 14,33), the forty days fast of Moses, before he received the tablets of the law from God (Ex. 34,28), and the 40 days journey of Elias to the mountain Horeb (I Kings 19,8). In the

New Testament, the Gospels speak of the fortieth day on which Joseph and Mary presented the child Jesus in the temple, the 40 days fast of our Lord in the desert (Mt. 4,2), and the 40 days sojourn of our Lord on earth after His resurrection (Acts 1,2).

aHoly Church from the very beginning sanctified the number "40". During the first centuries, the practice of a forty day penance was customary. This was followed by the Forty Days Fast before the Pasch (Easter). In our Rite, a child is brought to church forty days after its birth so that the rite of Churching may be performed over it; also on the fortieth day after death, we commemorate the dead.

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