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JUSTICE AS ASCETICISM

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Justice as Asceticism
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I recently spent a week at [Project Mexico](#), where fasting came up a number of times. It started with the effort to find food in the airport which did not contain meat, inspiring a few conversations about the idea of 'travel mercies,' the leniency granted to travelers who may not be able to find options which fulfill the fast. The conversation continued at the Orphanage. Due to government regulations imposed by the Mexican government, a certain amount of meat must be served each week at Orphanages. Our host made it clear to us that the primarily Catholic staff of the orphanage would do their best to make Lenten meals for us, but may at times forget, and for us to be gracious. He further pointed out that our presence in building a house was itself a fast, a 'work of mercy.'

As we discussed the particulars of fasting, I learned, for the first time, that we are supposed to fast from animals which have a back bone. I heard this, thought for a moment, and realized that for the first 16 years of my Orthodox life, the only times my family kept this version of the Lenten fast were the days my mother made spaghetti with Clam Sauce, about the only way you could ever get a clam into me. We survived the rest of lent eating \$1/pound whole Tuna that my mother would buy at the coast, fillet, and freeze until lent. Every member of my Russian Orthodox Church ate fish, it was our Lenten food. I had no idea that fish were eliminated from the fast because they have a backbone. I asked why the backbone was the issue, and the answer seems to be that animals without a backbone are a lower form of life. Ironic, given that the economy of Maine is sustained by this \$15/pound form of 'lower life.'

What struck me in these conversations was not the content, but the very fact that we were spending so much time talking about fasting. We pick apart the phrases 'fast' and 'abstain,' wondering if one means the type of food, the other the amount of food. We wonder whether on Sunday, as a day of Resurrection, we can break the fast, or do we just not abstain. Underlying all

of this is a different conversation. What we are really discussing was not whether or not we should eat this or that, how much we should eat, when we should eat and when we should abstain. Rather, we are struggling with what fasting means for us today in a culture of abundant and varied food, where it is not beef or poultry that is the luxury, but those very forms of 'lower life' which we are permitted.

Fasting is not meaningless today. Kerry SanChirico pointed out in his talk last year, "Lenten Transformation," that the money saved on meat both enables almsgiving and reminds us that most of the world survives without meat, not by choice, but by necessity: meat is expensive. Schmemmann argues that fasting, the feeling of hunger, is a physical reminder that we 'do not live by bread alone, but by every word that flows from the mouth of God.' Fasting as practiced in the monasteries was in part intended to create more time. In certain monastic communities, the weekend fast specified uncooked rather than cooked vegetables. Why? The time saved by not cooking is spent in more prayer. In each of these examples, fasting is never intended as a goal in itself. Fasting is meant to lead to something more.

The question is, what more does this lead to? Fasting saves money, and makes us conscious of the $\frac{3}{4}$ (no longer $\frac{2}{3}$) world which is malnourished; fasting reminds us of our dependence on God; fasting gives time for prayer. We do one thing, which leads to another. Hopefully. I say hopefully, because often fasting may lead us nowhere. I think our debates over various canons, traditions and customs can easily turn into a debate over exactly how much mint and cumin we tithe, without ever addressing the important question, what does fasting lead to?

Prayer, fasting and alms-giving, the three main characteristics of the ascetical life, are understood throughout the tradition of the Church as the means towards our transformation, as our participation in the process of becoming who we are, the image of God. Debates have raged over the centuries in the effort to specify the image of God in humanity. Short cutting all of these debates, and in agreement with particular strands of thought that run through a variety of our Church Fathers, I am going to summarize and say that the image of God in humanity is anything in us which is a reflection of our Creator. When we love, we express the image of God; when we are generous, when we are trustworthy, when we act with fidelity, when we are encouraging, when we are truthful, when we are servants. Notice that all of these require other people. We can only be the image of God in relationship with other people. You must love another person to be loving. You must serve another person to be a servant.

I think there is a real danger that our fasting, our prayer, and even our alms-giving, becomes self-serving. These elements become our own private discipline, focusing on our own inner change, our own 'salvation' which may or may not press us to become people of greater love. I have often heard the argument that these disciplines are social because we do them together. We fast together, supporting and encouraging one another to walk past that oddly appealing hot dog. Our time in church increases, adding in Wednesday liturgy as well as the Friday akathist. While the encouragement of the community is crucial to Lent, simply doing things together does not necessarily make us less self-focused, less individualistic. Lent can still be all about me.

This focus on ourselves, this focus on what is good for me, maybe my family, or perhaps (in a generous moment) I extend it to my group, ethnicity, nation, still has me and 'mine' at the

center. The reality is that we live in a world and a culture that is particularly ‘me’ focused. We all know that, we all experience it. It is a genuine danger. Yet it is not a unique danger; it is not new with the advent of the ‘West.’ The ascetical life of the East, by which I mean the Orthodox East, can run the same danger. Time spent in fasting and prayer, the life of the desert, is often done alone. But if Mary of Egypt had never met Fr. Zossima, would we benefit from her wisdom? If the monks of the desert had not settled themselves at the edges of cities, would we even have the ‘sayings of the desert fathers and mothers’? It is only in the return to one another that whatever we have learned comes to fruition, enabling everyone to experience greater transformation, greater deification. By the return from the desert, the whole community is blessed, and thus the community can bless the world.

But let me complicate this further by pointing out that most of us are not called to a monastic life. We are not called to years of strict fasting and prayer. Monasticism is a calling, but it is not a calling given to everybody. Frankly, it is not a calling given to the vast majority of the members of the Church. Most of us are called to live embedded in this world, embedded in business and chaos, living lives as mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, workers, commuters, students...leaving the world is not an option. So the question is, what does asceticism look like for us?

Remember, our transformation involves one another. Not only does transformation require being together, it requires *doing* together. No love without loving, no service without serving. What if we re-thought what fasting meant? What if, instead of our fasting being the means to something else, the saving of money, the discipline of the body or the creation of more time, our fasting is itself who we are to become? What if what we do by fasting is exactly what we are supposed to be?

Let me read to you from Isaiah 58, where Isaiah is speaking as a messenger of God:

58.6 Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.[\[1\]](#)

In this passage, our fast is to do justice. Fasting is not first and foremost a ‘giving up,’ unless of course, one must first give up injustice to do justice. Fasting in Isaiah is focused outward, it is focused on those in need. Jesus, according to Luke, opens his ministry by quoting Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4.18-19).

Justice in scripture *is not* simply about giving a person their due, which is the classical definition of justice. Justice *is not* procedural regulations which enforce and individual's rights and duties, and punish those who break the law. Justice *is not* primarily about retribution. In scripture, justice is about restoration. Justice is about restoring the land to those who have lost it, about placing a limit on the length of time over which a debt can be called in. Justice is both providing for those in need, the sick, the poor, the blind, the captive, the oppressed, as well as enabling them to care for themselves. It is not only about restoring people to their full abilities, but restoring people to their full roles as beloved members and participants in their communities.

While we could spend hours talking about any one of these elements of justice, I want to focus on one that I think is crucial for us as Orthodox Christians and citizens of the United States. All you have to do is stand by the gleaming, 20 foot tall, high-tech U.S. border fence, look to the south over the 5 foot corrugated iron fence of Mexico, and you can see that we are wealthy. The U.S. consumes 80% of the used resources in the world. We have a fraction of that population. We are wealthy. Not all of us are terribly wealthy, and we are good at hiding the poor who do live among us in ghettos, but most of us reading this have some level of wealth, even if it is only the opportunity to gain wealth. Wealth is not just money. It is capital, it is the opportunity to gain an education, to work in a productive manner. I live on a student stipend, and I have lots of school debt. But I live in a beautiful apartment, I have a car, I eat regularly, and I know, that someday in the future, hopefully a long-time in the future, I will inherit from my mother a beautiful house on the Pacific Ocean. In the world we live in, I am wealthy.

It may surprise us to hear that for St. John Chrysostom, fasting is *not* the highest virtue. Rather, it is "almsgiving, our excellent counselor, the queen of virtues, who quickly raises human beings to the heavenly vaults" (CATV 1.5).^[2] Chrysostom, in a series of sermons on repentance and almsgiving, points his listeners down the many roads to repentance. A sinner may confess, mourn the sin, practice humility, pray, and give alms (CATV 1.5, 4.15), but the greatest of these roads is clearly almsgiving. Almsgiving is so great a virtue that it surpasses virginity! The five virgins who neglected to fill their lamps with oil, which John interprets as their desire for money over the poor, fail to enter the wedding banquet. Their travail in maintaining their virginity was of no account as they failed to act in mercy and justice as well. Over one such virgin John exclaims, "I wish that you had longed for a man, for the crime would not have been so severe, because you would have desired matter of the same essence as yourself. Now, however, the condemnation is greater, since you desired foreign matter. Truly, even married women should not display inhumanity with the excuse that they have children" (CATV 3.13). The refusal to give alms is not simply a neglect of the poor, but a valuing of material things over the image of God, and as a result, is a display of inhumanity.

Chrysostom goes further. He compares the existence of the poor to the gladiatorial games of the day. The rich, debating over the 'deserving poor,' set themselves up as judge over the needs of others like "those who set up those games and give no prizes at all until they see others punishing themselves" (1Cor 188B).^[3] John accuses the rich of being unwilling to "lend an ear to people who are quite modest, who weep and call on God" (1Cor 188C). More concerned with checking

the accounts of the poor than being generous, the rich force the poor to clearly demonstrate their misery. It is not enough for the poor to appear to have a need, to be cold, weak from hunger, or half naked; the poor need to make it obvious. They need to mutilate themselves, chew on old shoes, perform in the streets. John mocks this attitude, asking why a person would choose such an appearance:

And even if they are pretending, they're pretending because of necessity and want, thanks to your cruelty and inhumanity which require such masks (and aren't inclined to mercy. For who is so wretched and miserable that, in the absence of a pressing necessity, they would submit to such disgrace, bewail their lot and put up with a punishment of that magnitude for the sake of a loaf of bread?[4]

The poor are not merely an object of pity. According to John, they have dignity, the same dignity the rich believe themselves to have. Nobody chooses out of pure pleasure to beg for bread, to endure the blank gazes or shameful stares of passersby, to be openly scolded for laziness or deceit. John does not hesitate to use sarcasm: the 'pretence' of the poor announces for all to hear the inhumanity of the rich (1Cor 187B). John asks the rich: Why do the poor go to such great and gruesome lengths? "Since you haven't learned to pity poverty but take pleasure in misfortunes, they satisfy your insatiable desire, and both for themselves and for us they kindle a fiercer flame in hell" (1Cor 187D).

Chrysostom says two things about wealth. First, "our money is the Lord's, however we may have gathered it" (OWP 49).[5] Second, God allows us wealth "not for you to waste on prostitutes, drink, fancy food, expensive clothes, and all the other kinds of indolence, but for you to distribute to those in need" (OWP 50). Wealth is theft not because it was stolen as a means of gaining wealth, but because keeping it is to deprive others of their needs: "To deprive is to take what belongs to another; for it is called deprivation when we take and keep what belongs to others" (OWP 49).

St. Basil echoes this thought: "The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry man; the coat hanging unused in your closet belongs to the man who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the man who has no shoes; the money which you put in the bank belongs to the poor. You do wrong to everyone you could help, but fail to help." St. Basil, himself a monk, chose to create a small city outside of his city, a self-sustaining community whose purpose was to care for those left out in the cold. His monastery was a vibrant community of justice, a home for the widow, the orphan, the sick, the needy, as well as a community of worship.

As Christians living lent in a world surrounded by need, how is it possible for us to do anything less than seek justice? This does not mean that we do not fast from food. But perhaps it is not fasting from food that is the most important. Isaiah is addressed to those of us who "serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers" (Is 58.3). We must fast from injustice, and do justice. Remember that for Chrysostom, watching the poor is the same as contributing to their suffering. If our fast does not include works of mercy, our effort might not matter. If our fast is not primarily about works of mercy, it might not matter. Lent is about our

transformation via repentance, fasting, the doing of mercy, and praying. In the words of our Mexican host, we are to do and be a ‘work of mercy.’

Bishop Phillip Brooks once said, “Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for power equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work will be no miracle; but you shall be a miracle.” The miracle our world needs is not people who can live on bread alone, but people who embody the justice of God. As people with wealth, a wealth of money, of capital, of talents, of opportunity, how will we use it to benefit those who do not have what we have been given?

[1] All Biblical Quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

[2] “Concerning Almsgiving and the Ten Virgins,” [CATV] 1.5, in John Chrysostom, *On Repentance and Almsgiving*, trans. Gus George Christo, *The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation* ; V. 96 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998).

[3] “On 1 Corinthians Homily 21,” [1Cor] 168-176, in Wendy Mayer, John Chrysostom, and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom*, ed. Carol Harrison, *The Early Church Fathers* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000).

[4] 1Cor 187A-B

[5] John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 109-110. [OWP]

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