

**IN THE NAME OF THE SELF – EXISTANT
SEMPITERNAL OF NECESSARY EXISTENCE THE ALMIGHTY
IGNATIUS PATRIARCH OF THE HOLY SEA OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST
SUPREME HEAD OF THE UNIVERSAL SYRIAC ORTHODOX CHURCH
ZAKKA I, IWAS**



“The Lent”

“Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly.” (Joel 1:14)

After praying for your well being and offering you our apostolic benedictions and benevolent prayers, we say:

The time for the Forty Days Holy Great Lent has arrived. It is a golden opportunity offered by our mother holy church to examine ourselves, to refrain from vices, uphold virtues, and return to God with repentance, “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2Cor. 6:2). Like the eagle training his young ones to soar high in the air, so does the holy church in training the faithful to soar in spiritual heights, giving them the graceful means to be liberated from earthly gravity that attracts them. The church also works to facilitate spiritual life so that they will progress in virtual spirituality until they reach the perfection of our holy gospel by crushing bodily inclinations and working, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life” (John 6:27). During lent they will abstain from food for limited period and take light foods voluntarily. And thus, the flame of holiness will flare in their hearts and moves them from one force to another by subjecting the will of the body to the will of the spirit, “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Galatians 5:17) according to St. Paul. Fasting enables the faithful to avoid the lust of the body and do the good they wish.

Yes indeed, fasting is a godly state. It was imposed first on our first parents as a first commandment. When they broke it they fell to sin and thus deserved death of all kinds. And after being close to God, they were far away that they hid from His Almighty face who they couldn't look at (Genesis 3:8) because they defied His godly command and didn't uphold His enforced fasting. And to please the Almighty, our fathers of old and prophets fasted. God commanded Moses the prophet to sanctify himself and the people by fasting before he draws near Mount Sinai to receive the commandments (Exodus 19:1-25). Moses fasted Forty days and Forty nights (Exodus 34:28) and found favor with God and became worthy to behold His glory (Exodus 33:13&18) and brought the law to the people.

Elijah the prophet fasted Forty days and Forty nights (1Kings 19:8) and vanquished Belial's priests and brought the people back to the law and became worthy to ascend to heaven by a fiery chariot.

Daniel the prophet fasted Three weeks in which he didn't have meat or wine (Daniel 10:2) and thus he blocked the mouths of the lions and wasn't harmed. The people of Nineveh fasted with their children and life stock (Jonah 3:7) and God accepted their repentance and their city was spared.

The fathers of old and the prophets practiced fasting to please God and refrain from evil actions especially in times of trials and tribulations.

Our Lord Jesus Christ commanded us to fast and put Himself as an example by fasting on our behalf Forty days and Forty nights after which He was hungry (Mathew 4:2). He was tempted by the devil but He defeated him and gave us the secret to victory by saying, "This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Mathew 17:21). When He was asked about the reason His disciples were ignoring fasting - according to their adversaries - His answer had the mandate upon His disciples to fast after His ascension into heaven by saying, "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Mathew 9:16). In other place He described the acceptable fasting to Him by saying, "When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites with a sad countenance" (Mathew 6:16).

From the book of the Acts of the apostles we see that the Lord's disciples uphold fasting specially upon electing leaders and during persecutions, wars, or pestilences, The apostle Paul fasted consecutively (2Cor. 6:5&11 & Acts 27:33).

The apostles commanded the faithful to fast. The church abided by it and organized all fasts. The history of the church shows that from the dawn of Christianity, Christians fasted the Forty Days Great Lent, the week of Passion, and Wednesdays and Fridays of every week. The church imposed severe penalties on clergy and laity who broke the fasting commandment. Elders, children, babies, sick, nursing, pregnant women, were exempted out of necessity. Saturdays and Sundays during which the holy Eucharist is celebrated, are excluded. After service the faithful will have fasting food. Our Syriac church doesn't start any fast on Sundays in honor of the Day of the Lord. We start Monday morning thus the number of days that year is one day shorter.

During lent, the holy church does not forbid eating foods out of having lawful or unlawful foods, but it aims at subjecting the will of the faithful to God Almighty by sanctifying and by practicing esteemed virtues specially the virtue of obedience to God's commandments issued by His servants the Metropolitans of the church which they were given by Him to bind and loose, and legislate the rules and regulations for the benefit of the faithful and the glory of God's holy name. Since the church is a

compassionate mother and righteous teacher, she does not want to lay heavy burdens remembering the Lord, saying, "Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" (Luke 11:46). For this, his holiness the late Patriarch Elias the Third - God bless his soul - (+1932) allowed eating fish during the Great Lent and also allowed the faithful in America to fast the first and the last week of the lent in addition to Wednesdays and Fridays. Also his holiness the late Patriarch Ephraim the First Barsom - God bless his soul - (+1957) allowed the same for the faithful in India in addition to softening other fasts for all in 1946. His holiness the late Patriarch Jacob the Third - God bless his soul - (+1980) also allowed fasting the first and last week of the Great Lent only, in addition to Wednesdays and Fridays for the clergy and laity during which he allowed them to have all kinds of foods in 1966 and also allowed celebrations, weddings, baptisms, Eucharist, and memorials during days in between. Our fathers, Patriarchs of the holy church permitted this out of mercy and compassion to avoid breaking the commandment and be exposed to the wrath of God, God forbid, He who abides by these exceptions does not commit sin but will be considered among those who didn't break the rules. But whoever fasts the whole period his reward will be multiplied.

How fitting for us then, my beloved, to set our righteous fathers as examples for us. The holy book commands us, saying, "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follows, considering the outcome of their conduct" (Hebrew 13:7), specially when we are living in turbulent times in which the flame of faith and love may be turned off in our hearts, and we became lazy in complying with the order of fasts and prayers while we are immersing with the lust of earthly matters. Thus, the saying of "whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame" (Philippians 3:19) will apply on us. It is an alarm bell warning us of being far away from God. Let us listen to God's words from the mouth of Joel, "Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly . . . rend your heart and not your garments" (Joel 1:14 & 2:13). Let us carry out an acceptable fasting not only abstaining from food and water but from evil and sins also. Let wicked thoughts be blocked out of our minds, bad words from our mouths, and evil lusts from our bodies. Let our will surrender to the Almighty God so that He may accept our fast as said by His prophet Isaiah, "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke ? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out?... Then you shall call and the Lord will answer. You shall cry and He will say, 'Here I am' (Isaiah 58: 6-12).

May the Lord God accept your fasting, your prayers, your charity work, your repentance, and make you worthy to celebrate His victorious resurrection feast with joy and sound health. May He have mercy on your beloved departed by the

intercession of St. Mary, the Mother of God, and St. Peter the head of the apostles and the rest of the martyrs and saints.

Have a happy Easter. ... ورحمة الله وبركاته Wa Aboun Dbashmayo

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