

The Holy Great Fast and Spiritual Discipline

Contributed by H.G. Bishop Youssef
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"The true fast is that in which sins, anger, tongue, and instincts are under control." (St Basil the Great)

The Holy Great Fast is often referred to as "The Spring of Our Spiritual Life". Spring being the most beautiful season of the year and a time of spiritual renewal.

The 55 days of the Holy Great Fast are considered the most Holy days of fasting of the Coptic Church. Fifty-five days include the forty days, which were fasted by the Lord Himself, the Passion Week, and the first initial week to prepare us spiritually before this great season of renewal. We fast to commemorate His sufferings on the Holy Cross, for spiritual discipline and our salvation.

Much has been written regarding fasting associated with foods. Yet, fasting is not only abstaining from certain foods. It is a time for us to have our hearts filled with the Holy Spirit. How can our hearts be filled with the Holy Spirit and guarded against all sin?

When we fast we exercise self-control. Fasting provides an occasion to enrich the soul and elevate it to a higher level of spiritual discipline. St Isaac said, "Having control of what we say is better than having control over our bodies, and guarding our hearts against sin is best of all."

St. John Cassian wrote, "We should not be confident that the outside fasting of food is enough alone for the purity of the heart and body, unless it is accompanied by the fasting of the soul." He further said that, "Fasting is an important means which leads to purity of heart and not as a goal in itself."

Fasting of the soul is spiritual discipline. The importance of spiritual discipline can be found in the Holy Book of Proverbs 25:28, "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control." This tells us that a man without self-control and discipline is defenseless and disgraced.

St. Paul believed that spiritual discipline prepared a Christian to exercise faith and enter the Kingdom of God:

"Do you know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus not with uncertainty. Thus I fight not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it under subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should not become disqualified" (I Corinthians 9:24-27).

Self-control incorporates dominance over desires including the physical desires of food and sex. Psychological desires of fame and love of praise must also be quenched.

Periodic ascetic practices are good within marriage. This includes temporary abstinence from sexual relations for the sake of prayer during fasting. The Holy Book of I Corinthians states, "Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (I Corinthians 7:5).

It has often been said that one has reached the pinnacle of spiritual success as soon as one becomes uninterested in money, compliments, or publicity and fame. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility considers others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

Spiritual discipline must always be accompanied with spiritual knowledge. This type of knowledge is not primarily mental but spiritual in nature and personal. It is experienced with faith, exercise, control, and will bear good fruits in the Lord Jesus Christ.

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ" (II Peter 1:5-8).

During this Great Holy Fast let us all further develop our need for spiritual discipline. The Holy Book of Wisdom of Solomon 8:7 tell us, "Do you love justice? All the virtues are a result of Wisdom's work: justice and courage, self-control and understanding. Life can offer us nothing more valuable than these."

To develop self-control during this Holy Great Fast it is recommended that one begin with:

- Love of Godliness and Righteousness (St Felix says, "When any person sets on the way of righteous, he starts with fasting, for without asceticism all other virtues like prayer, thoughts, and mind are not pure, and the inner man cannot be renewed.")
- Clear Goals [Our Lord Jesus Christ warns us, "Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness and cares of this life" (Luke 21:34).
- Brotherly Kindness ["And herein do I exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and toward men" (Acts 24:16).
- Desire for diligent practice of spiritual exercises [St Paul said, "I keep under my body and bring it into subjection" (I Corinthians 9:27). Spiritual exercises capture our bodies and senses by not giving into the things desired. Spiritual discipline is training to the body and senses, which leads to purity of the soul.

"I would have you learn this great fact: that a life of doing right is the wisest life there is. If you live that kind of life, you'll not limp or stumble as you run" (Proverbs 4:11-12).

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