What is Lenten fasting? For some, it is yet another extended period when certain foods must be avoided. However, to a Christian, it is a time of intense fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and spiritual reflection, offered as a sacrifice to Christ and serving as an expression of their love for Him.

what does this small Lenten sacrifice of fasting entail? It is our way to remember that He comes first in our lives and guard ourselves against letting our daily distractions crowd Him out. Lent's call demands a response, an act of will. It is a chance for us to share in Christ's crucifixion. Fasting is also our powerful spiritual tool in the battle against evil. "Fasting is a weapon prepared by God," writes St Isaac the Syrian. "If the Lawgiver himself fasted, how can anyone bound by the law not fast?... Before fasting, humankind

this adversary and tormentor recoils in fear, reflecting and remembering his defeat in the wilderness by the Saviour, and his power crumbles." Furthermore, the essence of fasting is to detach from worldly distractions and focus on spiritual growth. "The sacrifices of God are a contrite spirit," says Psalm 51:17. The point of fasting is to let go of what consumes us and distances us from God. Lent is a time to serve God through prayer and repentance by calming our passions and refining our souls. When passions quiet, spiritual

clear our conscience and repent before God. Finally, fasting enhances our prayers, making them deeper and more focused. , fasting lifts our prayers to God as if on wings. According to writes that "prayers are offered with attention, especially during fasting, because all that time the soul is lighter, unburdened and unsuppressed by the deadly weight of pleasures." Fasting is indeed the most blessed time for such repentant prayer.

How to do a Lenten fast? Start with the right attitude! Few now doubt fasting's beneficial effects on body and soul. Even secular doctors recommend fasting (as a diet), noting the body's positive response to a break from animal proteins and fats. Yet, as

Heaven just because we abstain from rich foods? Unlikely. That would be far too

poses

the question, "Can we call it fasting if we merely follow the rules about not eating rich foods on fast days?" Will our soul be cleansed if we skip, say, a meat pie or a creamy salad on Wednesday or Friday? Or might we enter the Kingdom of

simple.

fasting.

-()-

Fasting is about more than just food; it's about kindness and humility. "Whoever limits fasting to abstaining from food greatly dishonours it," instructs St John Chrysostom. "Many Christians... consider it a sin to eat rich food on a fast day, even out of bodily weakness, yet they have no qualms about scorning and

judging their neighbour, such as acquaintances, or giving offence, cheating,

short-changing, short-measuring, or indulging in carnal impurity," writes St John

of Kronstadt. "Oh, hypocrisy, hypocrisy! Oh, how poorly you grasp the spirit of

Christ, the spirit of the Christian faith! Is it not inner purity, meekness, and

humility that the Lord our God requires of us first and foremost?" Indeed, a bodily fast alone, especially a lengthy one, often breeds irritability, anger, impatience, or even vanity, self-importance, and pride. The true purpose of fasting is to root out these sinful traits. So, without the right attitude, without grasping its true meaning, fasting can instead become harmful. True fasting involves the whole self, turning away from all forms of wrongdoing. "Not only the mouth must fast - no, let the eye, the ear, the hands, and our whole body fast too... Fasting means turning from evil, bridling the tongue, putting away anger, stilling lusts, and ceasing slander, falsehood, and perjury... Are you fasting? Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the sick, do not forget

those in prison, have pity on the afflicted, comfort those who grieve and weep;

be merciful, meek, kind, peaceful, patient, compassionate, forgiving, reverent,

dignified, and devout, so God will accept your fast and grant you the fruits of

repentance in abundance," instructs Chrysostom, concerning the right attitude to

Fasting should be a balanced journey of the heart and spirit. "The law of fasting

is this," instructs St Theophan the Recluse, "to dwell in God with mind and heart,

detached from all things, cutting off all self-indulgence, not only bodily but also

spiritual, doing everything for the glory of God and the good of our neighbours,

willingly and lovingly bearing the labours and deprivations of fasting in food,

sleep, rest, and the comforts of fellowship - all in moderation, so as not to draw

attention or hinder prayer." So, as we fast bodily, let us also fast spiritually. Let humility guide us as we combine outward and inward fasting. As we cleanse the body through abstinence, we will also cleanse the soul through repentant prayer, gaining virtue and love for others. This is true fasting, pleasing to God, and therefore, salvific. -()-

constitutes a separate liturgical cycle, containing Lazarus Saturday, Palm Sunday, and Holy Week. Therefore, Orthodox Great Lent fasting rules continue until Easter, celebrated on 20 April this year. Not surprisingly, many faithful Christians believe that the end of Great Lent is Orthodox Easter.

time between the end of Lent and Easter - in 2025 and all other years -

What are the diet rules for Lenten fasting?

rules: Dry eating - that is, bread, fresh, dried, and pickled vegetables and fruits; Cooked food without oil - boiled vegetables without vegetable oil; Wine and oil allowed - wine is consumed in moderation to bolster strength; Fish allowed. The first and final weeks of Lent - Holy Week - are the strictest. For the first two days of the first week, Church rules call for complete abstinence from food. During Holy Week, dry eating is prescribed (no cooking or frying), and on Friday and Saturday, believers abstain from food entirely. The general rule: during Lent, abstain from meat, fish, eggs, milk, vegetable oil, and wine. Eat only once a day. On Saturdays and Sundays, vegetable oil and

wine are permitted, and you may eat twice a day (except for Saturday in Holy

Can you break Lenten fast on Sundays? The fasting rules apply at all times

throughout Lent, although they are relaxed on some days. Thus, the Feast of the

Do we fast every day? The feat of fasting counts for nothing with the Lord if, as St

Basil the Great puts it, "we do not eat meat, but devour our brother," that is, if we

fail to keep the Lord's commands about love, mercy, selfless service to our

neighbour - in short, all that we will be asked about on the Day of Judgement

Annunciation (25 March/7 April) and Palm Sunday (the Entry of the Lord into

Jerusalem) are the days when fish is allowed. On Lazarus Saturday (the day

before Palm Sunday), fish roe is permitted.

join these weekday services.

-()-

at times.

A similar story is told of

-()-

-()-

remain in Lent.

of the Cross.

-()-

-()-

From a culinary standpoint, Lenten fasts have four levels, established by Church

Lent is a season of prayer and repentance, when we should ask the Lord's forgiveness for our sins (through confession and preparation) and worthily receive the Holy Mysteries of Christ. It is advised to confess and receive Communion at least once, yet one should aim to do so three times during Great

Saturdays and Sundays, but also on weekdays, since the unique shape of Lenten

worship is fully revealed only during these services. So, at least a few times in

Great Lent, everyone should try to set aside work, studies, and daily cares, and

Lent: in the first week, on the fourth week, and in Passion Week–on Great

Thursday. It matters greatly, in Great Lent, to attend services not only on

the heart pure." It is not possible to lay down one single fast for monastics, clergy, and laity, still less to provide separate exceptions for the elderly, the unwell, children, and so on. So, the rules spell out only the strictest standards, towards which all the faithful should strive, where possible.

Sometimes, love and hospitality prevail over strict fasting rules. As the Apostle Paul said: "If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience's They say that when St Tikhon lived in retirement at Zadonsk Monastery, he once visited the monastery's schema-monk Mitrofan on a Friday during the sixth week of Lent. Mitrofan had a guest, a man whose pious life endeared him to the saint. That day, a fisherman, known to them, brought Father Mitrofan a live sterlet for . As the guest did not plan to stay until Sunday, the schema-monk

Is it a mortal sin to break a fast?

ourselves and setting aside all grievances and debts in order to initiate the Great Lent, that time of year when we are most called to seek closeness to the Lord through self-denial, charity, and humble-mindedness. The first Sunday of Great Lent celebrates the " ," instituted by Empress Theodora in 842 to commemorate the victory of the Orthodox at the Seventh Ecumenical Council. During this feast, icons from the church stand in a semi-circle on analogions (icon stands) in the middle of the nave. At the end of the Liturgy, the clergy offer a moleben before the icons of the Saviour and the Mother of God, asking the Lord to strengthen Orthodox Christians in their faith and guide those who have strayed. The deacon then reads the Nicene Creed aloud and pronounces anathemas, separating from the Church all who distort the truths of the Orthodox faith. He proclaims "eternal memory" for all departed

defenders of the Orthodox faith, and "many years" for the living.

On the second Sunday, the Eastern Orthodox Church remembers one of the

The fourth Sunday commemorates St John Climacus, who wrote " ", outlining the steps of virtuous deeds leading us to God's throne. On Thursday of the fifth week, the so-called " "Mary's Standing") is held. During this service, which may last for many hours, the Great Canon of is chanted once more—as it was on the first four days of Great Lent-alongside the life of St Mary of Egypt. Once a great sinner, she shows everyone what true repentance looks like and reminds us of God's boundless mercy. On the fifth Sunday of Great Lent, the Church again commemorates St Mary of Egypt. Through her example, the Church reveals genuine repentance and, to encourage those striving in spirit, shows how God's boundless kindness

embraces every penitent sinner. The sixth week sets aside time for those who fast

to prepare for a worthy encounter with the Lord, holding branches of virtue and

The sixth Sunday of Great Lent is the great feast of the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem, also known as Palm Sunday (the Sunday of Branches or the Blossoming Sunday). At the All-Night Vigil, after the Gospel reading, "Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ" is not sung. Instead, Psalm 50 is read, and blossoming willow branches (or other plants) are blessed with prayer and the

Great Lent in 2025 Lent encompasses Great Lent itself (the first forty days) and Holy Week (the six days preceding Easter). Between them lie Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday (the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem). Thus, Great Lent spans seven weeks (48 days, strictly speaking). The beginning and end of Lent are moveable dates, which means that they happen at different times in different years. So when does Lent start in 2025? And when does it end? This year, it begins on Monday, 3 March and - technically speaking - ends on the evening of 11 April, the Friday before Palm Sunday. The

-()-

-()-

Week).

-()-

(Matthew 25:31-46). In this sense, fasting is a daily effort. -()-

Fasting is for everyone: monastics and laity alike. It is neither a burden nor a punishment. We should see it as a life raft, a healing remedy for every human soul. "Fasting excludes no one - not women, nor the elderly, nor the young, not even small children," says St John Chrysostom, "but opens its doors to all, receives all, to save all." "See what fasting achieves," writes , "it heals illnesses, drives away demons, banishes evil thoughts, and makes

Who is exempt from Lenten fasting?

avoiding extremes of overly zealous denial and lax indulgence. In the first scenario, attempting rules beyond your reach may harm your body and soul; in the second, you will not find the needed physical and spiritual focus. So what are the rules of Lenten fasting for seniors? Are pregnant and nursing women exempt? Each believer should work out what they can manage in body and spirit, and then take on whatever self-denial they can handle - keeping their minds on cleansing our souls.

Laypeople often ease their fast - and should do so with their priest's blessing.

nursing women, and children may follow a lighter fast, perhaps only during the

first and last weeks of Lent. The key is to find the right measure of fasting, without

being overzealous, or too self-indulgent, as some unprepared Christians can be

Those new to fasting should perhaps start gradually. Seniors, pregnant and

Prayers remind us: "fast with a pleasant fast". This tells us to gauge our strength,

sake" (1 Corinthians 10:27) - for the sake of the person offering hospitality. had the sterlet made into fish soup and a cold dish. St Tikhon found Father Mitrofan and his guest enjoying this meal. Startled by the unexpected visit and believing himself guilty of breaking the fast, the schema-monk fell at St Tikhon's feet, begging forgiveness. But the saint, knowing the strict lives of both men, said, "Sit down, I know you. Love is higher than fasting." He then joined them at the table and ate the fish soup.

a strict Lenten fast, a weary traveller arrived. Seeing the stranger's exhaustion, St

Spyridon asked his daughter to bring food. She replied they had neither bread

nor flour, as they had not stocked up before the strict fast. St Spyridon prayed,

Meatfare Week. After she prepared it, St Spyridon sat with the traveller and

The saint replied, "All the more reason not to refuse, for the Word of God

declares: 'To the pure all things are pure' " (Titus 1:15).

The Sundays of Orthodox Great Lent

days preceding Easter). Between them lie

asked forgiveness, and told his daughter to cook some salted pork left over from

invited the traveller to join him. The traveller declined, saying he was a Christian.

These, however, are exceptional circumstances. The key is to avoid any deceit;

Lent encompasses Great Lent itself (the first forty days) and Holy Week (the six

(the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem). Excluding Palm Sunday, five Sundays

On the eve of Great Lent, Forgiveness Sunday is celebrated, when we bow to

each other and formally beg for our neighbour's forgiveness, mutually humbling

otherwise, one might spend the whole fast under the guise of loving one's

neighbour, visiting friends or hosting them and eating non-fasting foods.

. During

and Palm Sunday

great theologians -, Archbishop of Thessalonica, who lived in the fourteenth century. He taught, in line with Orthodox belief, that through fasting and prayer, the Lord enlightens the faithful with His gracious light, which shone on Mount Tabor. Hence, St Gregory's insights on the strength of self-denial and supplication came to be upheld, and so his commemoration was set on this day. On the third Sunday of Great Lent, at Vespers, the Holy Cross is brought out after the Great Doxology for veneration by the faithful. As everyone bows before the Cross, the Church sings: "Before Your Cross, we bow down in worship, O Master, and Your holy Resurrection, we glorify." This hymn replaces the Thrice Holy Hymn ("Trisagion") during the Liturgy. The Church presents the Cross at the midpoint of Lent to inspire and strengthen those fasting, reminding them of Christ's suffering and death, and encouraging them to continue their Lenten journey. The Holy Cross remains for veneration throughout the week until Friday, when it is

returned to the altar after the Hours, before the Liturgy. Therefore, the third

Sunday and the fourth week of Great Lent are called the Week of the Veneration

recalling His Passion. Lazarus Saturday falls on the sixth week of Great Lent, between the Great Lent and the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem. The service on Lazarus Saturday stands out for its depth and meaning, for it remembers Jesus Christ's raising of Lazarus. At Matins, the Sunday "troparia after the psalm verses 'Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your statutes," are sung, and at the Liturgy, "As many as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia" replaces the "Holy God."

sprinkling of holy water. These consecrated boughs are given to the faithful who stand, candles lit, until the end of the service, showing life's triumph over death (the Resurrection). From Vespers on Palm Sunday, the dismissal begins with the words, "The Lord who is coming to His voluntary passion for our salvation, Christ our true God..." and so forth. -()-As you journey through Great Lent, remember that it is more than just a time of dietary restrictions; it is a spiritual pilgrimage that invites you to deepen your connection with God and your community. Let this be a season where abstaining from certain foods serves as a reminder to nourish your soul with prayer, humility,

and acts of kindness. Embrace the opportunity to reflect on your life, seek

forgiveness, and extend love and compassion to those around you. Whether

you're fasting, praying, or giving to those in need, know that each step brings

is not just about the body but about transforming the heart and spirit. Let this

Lenten season be a time of renewal and spiritual growth, leading you to the

joyous celebration of Easter with a heart full of love and gratitude.

you closer to the true essence of faith. As St John Chrysostom reminds us, fasting

understanding brightens. We see our flaws more clearly. We have a longing to

-()-Why do we fast during the Lenten season? Fasting is first of all an expression of our faith and love for God, as He had commanded us. For our children, our loved ones, we would willingly go hungry if

it meant giving them the last piece of food. For love, we make any sacrifice. And knew no victory, and the devil never tasted defeat... Our Lord was the leader and firstborn of this triumph... And as soon as the devil sees this weapon in anyone,