

THE FASTING WAY

Orthodox Fasting for Body and Soul

EASTERN WISDOM · WESTERN SCIENCE AND A STEADY MIND

JEREMY ROBINSON

AUSTIN HOLISTIC FITNESS & NUTRITION



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The Fasting Way: Orthodox Fasting for Body and Soul
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This book is for general education and spiritual encouragement only. It is not medical advice and is not a substitute for care from your doctor or guidance from your priest. Please read the Important Health Note at the end of this book before changing how you eat or starting any supplement.

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A Word Before We Begin

Thank you for opening this little book.

My name is Jeremy Robinson. I have been coaching people on food, movement, and health since 2001, and I opened Austin Holistic Fitness & Nutrition in 2015. Over those years I have sat across the table from a lot of people at the start of a fasting season. Some were excited. Some were nervous. Many were a little of both.

A pattern I see often goes like this. The fast begins, and with the best of intentions a person takes out the meat, the cheese, and the eggs. What fills the empty space is bread, pasta, crackers, and chips. By the second week they are tired, hungry an hour after eating, short with their family, and quietly wondering why something holy feels so hard. The problem usually isn't their faith. It's their plate, their sleep, and the story they are telling themselves.

I want to be clear about one thing from the first page. The Orthodox fast is not a diet. It is a spiritual practice that the Church has kept for nearly two thousand years. Its goal is not a smaller waistline. Its goal is a softer heart, a clearer mind, and a life turned more fully toward God and toward other people. If your body feels better along the way, that is a gift, not the point.

So why would a fitness and nutrition coach write about it? Because the body and the soul are not strangers. When you are running on crackers and coffee, it is harder to be patient. When you have slept five hours, it is harder to pray. When you are hungry and frustrated, it is easier to snap at the person next to you. Taking care of the body during a fast is not a distraction from the spiritual work. It can make room for it.

That is what I mean when I say we mix Eastern and Western ideals. From the East, from the Church Fathers and the long life of the Orthodox Church, we receive the *why* of fasting: prayer, watchfulness, humility, and love. From the West we borrow some useful *how*: what nutrition science has learned about protein and filling meals, what psychology has learned about habits and environment. The East gives the purpose. The West offers a few tools. The purpose always leads.

One more word about who I am: I'm a coach, not a priest. I don't speak for the Church, and nothing here replaces the guidance of your own priest or spiritual father. This book describes Orthodox practice, but I hope Christians of every tradition find it useful. If that's you, follow your own pastor and your own church's calendar.

Two promises. First, I will not tell you how strictly to fast. That is a conversation for you and your priest or spiritual father. I will explain the general shape of the Church's fasting rules so you understand them, and then I will help you eat well inside whatever rule you have been given.

Second, I will keep it simple. You don't need a cabinet full of products or a spreadsheet of macros to fast well. You need a plan, a few good foods, a little support, and a lot of grace.

BEFORE YOU CHANGE HOW YOU EAT

The fasting guidelines assume good health. If you have a medical condition, are pregnant or nursing, take medication for diabetes or blood pressure, have allergies, or have a history of an eating disorder, talk to your doctor and your priest before changing how you eat. Please also read the Important Health Note at the end of this book.

Let's begin.

Jeremy Robinson

CHAPTER ONE

Why the Church Fasts

If you ask ten people why Christians fast, you might get ten different answers. To lose weight. To prove discipline. To feel closer to God. To follow the rules. The Orthodox Church gives a fuller and gentler answer, and it is worth taking a few pages to understand it, because the *why* shapes everything about the *how*.

Fasting is as old as the faith

Fasting runs all the way through Scripture. Moses fasted forty days on the mountain. Elijah journeyed forty days to Horeb on the strength of the food God provided. The people of Nineveh fasted when they repented. Christ Himself fasted forty days in the wilderness before beginning His public ministry, and when He was tempted to turn stones into bread, He answered, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Notice what Christ did *not* say. He did not say bread is bad. He said bread is not enough. The fast is a way of remembering, in our bodies, that we depend on God for more than food.

The early Christians kept regular fast days from the very beginning. A very early Christian teaching document called the *Didache* already speaks of fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays. The Church has fasted on those days ever since. By long tradition, Wednesday recalls the betrayal of Christ, and Friday His crucifixion.

Fasting in secret

The clearest teaching on fasting comes from Christ in the Sermon on the Mount:

> *"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."*
> — MATTHEW 6:16–18

Notice that Christ says "*when* you fast," not "*if* you fast." He assumes His followers will fast. But He also warns about the biggest danger of fasting, which is pride. If we fast so others will notice, or so we can feel superior, we have already received all the reward we will get. Fasting is meant to be quiet. It is between you and God.

This has very practical meaning. You don't need to announce your fast at the office lunch. You don't need to sigh about how hungry you are. You don't need to lecture the person eating a burger. Wash your face, so to speak, and get on with your day.

Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving belong together

In the same chapter of Matthew, right before the passage on fasting, Christ teaches about giving to the poor and about prayer. The Church has always kept these three together, like three legs of a stool. Take one away and the stool falls over. In plain terms, each practice protects the others: prayer keeps fasting pointed toward God, almsgiving keeps it pointed toward our neighbor, and fasting gives both of them focus and room.

Fasting without prayer becomes a diet. Fasting without almsgiving can become self-focused, even proud. The prophet Isaiah put it powerfully when God speaks through him about the kind of fast He desires:

> *"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; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?"*
> — ISAIAH 58:6–7

A simple way to keep the three together: whatever you save by eating simply, give away. Whatever time you save by not snacking or cooking elaborate meals, give some of it to prayer.

Freedom from the passions

The Church Fathers talk a great deal about the *passions*. In Orthodox language, a passion is not a hobby or a strong feeling. It is a disordered desire that has started to rule us: gluttony, anger, greed, lust, envy, pride, and their cousins. A passion is any desire that has become the master instead of the servant.

Fasting is one of the main tools the Church gives us for regaining freedom. Here is how it works. Every time you feel a desire for food and you calmly say "not now," you practice the skill of not obeying every impulse. It is a small "no." But small "no's" add up. A person who has practiced saying no to cheese on a Wednesday is better prepared to say no to a cutting remark, to an angry email, or to a temptation that matters much more. The Church Fathers speak often of this kind of self-control, and they are clear that it grows by God's grace working with our effort, not by willpower alone.

St. Basil the Great, in his First Homily on Fasting, taught that the benefit of fasting is not only about food. True fasting means turning away from evil: forgiving others, avoiding quarrels, and restraining anger and harsh words. He puts it sharply: "You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother." (The English is adapted from *On Fasting and Feasts*; see Notes and Sources.)

Watchfulness

Another word you will meet in Orthodox writing is *nepsis*, usually translated as watchfulness or sobriety. It means keeping a calm, alert attention on your own heart and thoughts, noticing what rises in you before it carries you away.

Fasting trains watchfulness in a very practical way. When your usual comforts are removed, you start to notice how often you reach for them. You notice the 3 p.m. trip to the pantry that has nothing to do with hunger. You notice that you eat when you're bored, lonely, or stressed. That noticing is the beginning of change. You cannot bring to God what you have not first seen.

The *Philokalia* is full of teaching on watchfulness. It gathers writings by monastic fathers across many centuries and was compiled in the eighteenth century by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth. A common thread is that thoughts come before actions, so guarding the thoughts guards the life.

The fast is for joy

It would be easy to think of fasting as gloomy. The Church sees it differently. Fr. Alexander Schmemann famously described Great Lent as a "bright sadness." We fast in order to feast. Every fasting season leads to a great celebration: Pascha, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, the Dormition of the Theotokos, the Nativity of Christ. On the night of Pascha, the Church reads the Paschal Homily of St. John Chrysostom, which welcomes everyone to the feast, both those who fasted carefully and those who did not, those who came early and those who came at the last hour. All are invited to rejoice.

That tells us something important. The fast is not a test we pass or fail. It is a way back to God that the whole Church walks together, with room for those who stumble and for those who arrive late.

A brief look West

It can help to see the Orthodox fast next to the Lenten practice many Western Christians keep, because the contrast makes both clearer.

In the Roman Catholic Church in the United States today, the basic Lenten rule sets a simple minimum. Adults fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, which means one full meal and two smaller meals that together are less than a full meal. Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence from meat, and fish is welcome. Church law also treats every Friday of the year as a day of penance. Many Catholics freely go well beyond that minimum. Protestant traditions vary widely. Many Christians fast privately or "give something up" for Lent, such as sweets, alcohol, or social media, and add a spiritual practice like extra prayer, Scripture reading, or giving.

These are sincere and beautiful practices, kept by many Western Christians with real devotion, and fasting is never a contest between traditions. The Orthodox fast is simply shaped differently. It covers more of the year, it sets aside whole food groups, and it follows a common rule that the whole Church keeps together. That shared rule is a great help. When you fast in the Orthodox Church, you are not fasting alone. Your parish, and millions of Orthodox Christians around the world, are fasting with you.

IN SHORT

- The fast is spiritual first. It is not a diet.
- Fast quietly, without pride.
- Keep fasting, prayer, and almsgiving together.
- Fasting trains freedom from the passions and builds watchfulness.
- Every fast leads to a feast.

CHAPTER TWO

The Fasting Calendar in Plain Words

The Orthodox fasting calendar can look complicated at first. Once you see the pattern, it becomes simple. This chapter gives you the general shape. Practices differ a bit between jurisdictions, between monasteries and parishes, and between the Old (Julian) and New (Revised Julian) calendars. Your parish calendar and your priest are the final word.

YOUR PRIEST DECIDES YOUR STRICTNESS

The rules below describe the full fast as the Church's calendar presents it. These guidelines assume good health. Many people, especially those who are new, those with a medical condition (including diabetes or allergies), pregnant or nursing mothers, children, the elderly, and people who do heavy physical work, are given a gentler rule by their priest. This is not cheating. The Church calls this merciful, pastoral application of the rule *economia*. It is received in obedience, and obedience is itself part of the fast. Bring your questions to your priest or spiritual father before the season begins. If you belong to another Christian tradition, follow the guidance of your own pastor and your own church's calendar.

What "fasting" means at the table

On a typical Orthodox fast day, the traditional rule is to abstain from:

- **Meat** of all kinds, including poultry.

- **Dairy**: milk, cheese, butter, yogurt.
- **Eggs.**
- **Fish** with a backbone.
- **Oil**: traditionally olive oil. How oil is kept varies by jurisdiction. Some pastors, for example in the Antiochian tradition, teach that fasting from olive oil is a monastic practice, not expected of laypeople. Follow your priest.
- **Wine**: the traditional texts name wine. Customs differ on other alcoholic drinks, so ask your priest.

That leaves a lot on the table: vegetables, fruits, beans, lentils, grains, potatoes, nuts and seeds (in most practice), herbs and spices, soy foods like tofu and tempeh, and **shellfish and other invertebrates**. These are traditionally permitted in most Byzantine practice; customs vary, so ask your priest. Shellfish was traditionally simple, cheap food of the poor, so keep it that way: plain, low-cost options such as frozen shrimp or canned clams, rather than a seafood feast.

The Fathers also teach that we should eat *less*, not just eat differently. A huge plate of fancy vegan food is technically fasting food, but it misses the spirit. Simple meals in modest amounts are the goal.

Levels of the fast

You will hear people describe fast days by what is permitted. In everyday terms:

- **A strict day**: no meat, dairy, eggs, fish, oil, or wine.
- **A wine and oil day**: the same, but olive oil and wine are allowed.
- **A fish day**: fish is also allowed, along with oil and wine.
- **A fast-free day or week**: everything is allowed, even on Wednesday and Friday.

Some days also call for less frequent eating, and monasteries keep even stricter forms such as “dry eating” (uncooked food only) at certain times. Those are matters for guidance from your priest, not for self-assignment.

The weekly fast: Wednesdays and Fridays

Most weeks of the year, Wednesday and Friday are strict fast days, though a great feast or your parish calendar may allow oil and wine, or even fish, on some of them. This weekly fast is the most constant part of Orthodox fasting. Even outside the big seasons, these two days keep the rhythm going.

There are a few **fast-free weeks** when Wednesday and Friday fasting is lifted to celebrate a great feast:

- The days from the Nativity of Christ (December 25) up to the eve of Theophany (January 5).
- The week following the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, a few weeks before Great Lent.
- Bright Week, the week after Pascha.
- The week after Pentecost.

During Cheesefare Week, the last week before Great Lent, meat is set aside but dairy, eggs, and fish are still eaten every day, as a gentle step down into the fast.

The four fasting seasons

SEASON	WHEN	GENERAL PATTERN
Great Lent and Holy Week	About seven weeks before Pascha. The dates move each year.	Strict on weekdays. Oil and wine on Saturdays and Sundays. Fish on the Annunciation (March 25) and Palm Sunday.
Apostles' Fast	From the Monday after All Saints' Sunday until June 28. Its length changes each year.	Lighter. Fish, oil, and wine on many days. Wednesdays and Fridays stay strict.
Dormition Fast	August 1 to 14.	Strict on weekdays. Oil and wine on weekends. Fish on the Transfiguration (August 6).

SEASON	WHEN	GENERAL PATTERN
Nativity Fast	November 15 to December 24.	Fish, oil, and wine on many days early on. Stricter as Christmas approaches and on Wednesdays and Fridays.
Single fast days	August 29, September 14, and January 5.	Strict, though oil and wine are sometimes allowed.

The Orthodox fasting year at a glance. Fixed dates are given on the New (Revised Julian) Calendar. On the Old (Julian) Calendar the fixed-date fasts fall 13 days later on the civil calendar: the Nativity Fast runs November 28 to January 6, and the Dormition Fast August 14 to 27. Great Lent and Pascha follow the shared Paschalion, so nearly all Orthodox churches begin Lent on the same day. The Apostles' Fast starts after Pentecost on both calendars, but it ends on a fixed date (the eve of June 29), so its length differs between the calendars.

A few notes on each season:

Great Lent is the longest and most intense fast of the year. It begins on Clean Monday and runs forty days, followed by Lazarus Saturday, Palm Sunday, and Holy Week, which is the strictest week of all. Holy Week ends at the Paschal Liturgy, and then the feasting begins.

The Apostles' Fast follows Pentecost and leads up to the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29. Its start depends on Pentecost, which moves with Pascha, but its end is fixed, so its length changes from year to year. On the Old Calendar, where June 29 falls on July 12 of the civil calendar, it is usually several weeks long. On the New Calendar it can be very short, and in years when Pascha is very late it may vanish altogether.

The Dormition Fast lasts two weeks and prepares us for the feast of the Falling Asleep of the Theotokos on August 15. It is short but strict, much like Great Lent.

The Nativity Fast, sometimes called Advent or the Winter Lent, starts on November 15 and prepares us for Christmas. It is gentler at the start, with fish allowed on many days, and grows stricter in the final days before the feast. If you are reading this in the fall, the Nativity Fast is a wonderful place to start applying what is in this book.

Before Holy Communion

Separate from the fasting seasons, Orthodox Christians traditionally keep a complete fast from food and drink from the night before receiving Holy Communion, usually from midnight or from bedtime, until after the Liturgy. Your priest can tell you how this applies to you, especially if you take medication in the morning.

IF YOU TAKE DIABETES MEDICATION

If you take insulin or a sulfonylurea (such as glipizide, glyburide, or glimepiride), the morning fast before Communion can lead to low blood sugar. Before you keep it, ask your doctor how to handle your medication that morning, and ask your priest how to keep the fast safely.

About half the year

Add it all up and the Orthodox Church fasts, in one form or another, on roughly half the days of the year. That is exactly why nutrition matters. A two-day fast barely touches your nutrient stores. Six months of mostly plant-based eating, done carelessly, can. With a little planning, it can be kept well.

IN SHORT

- Strict fast: no meat, dairy, eggs, fish, oil, or wine. Shellfish is traditionally permitted in most practice; ask your priest.
- Wednesdays and Fridays most weeks, plus four seasons and a few single days.
- Some days relax the rule for oil, wine, or fish.
- Eat simply and in modest amounts.
- Your priest sets your personal rule.

CHAPTER THREE

East Meets West: What the Science Says

The Church did not design the fast around nutrition science. It designed it around the salvation of souls. Still, it is fascinating to look at Orthodox fasting through Western scientific eyes, because the two often meet in surprising ways. This chapter is not here to "prove" the fast. The fast needs no proving. It is here to help you keep it wisely.

The Orthodox fast is mostly a plant-based pattern

Take away meat, dairy, eggs, and fish, and what remains is a plant-based way of eating, with shellfish as an occasional addition. Researchers on the Greek island of Crete followed Orthodox Christians through a full year of fasting seasons and compared them with neighbors who did not fast (Sarri and colleagues, 2003 and 2004; see Notes and Sources).

During the fasting seasons, the people who fasted ate more fiber and less saturated fat, and at the end of those seasons their total and LDL cholesterol were lower than the comparison group's. The same research also found that they took in less protein and less calcium. Like any mostly plant-based pattern, the fast also calls for attention to vitamin B12.

In other words: eating well on the fast doesn't happen automatically. It depends on what goes on the plate.

Different from Western "intermittent fasting"

In the West, "fasting" today often means intermittent fasting or time-restricted eating, where you go without food for a certain number of hours each day. The Orthodox fast is different. It is mainly about *what* you eat, and secondly about eating *less* and more simply. Some traditional practice also includes eating fewer meals, or not eating until later in the day on certain fast days. If your priest gives you that kind of rule, the advice in this chapter about filling, well-paired meals matters even more.

FEWER MEALS AND DIABETES MEDICATION

If you take insulin or a sulfonylurea, eating fewer meals or waiting until later in the day to eat can lead to low blood sugar. Talk with your doctor before changing when or how often you eat, and with your priest about your rule.

The bread and pasta trap

Here is the single most common mistake I see during fasting seasons.

When people remove meat, eggs, and cheese, they usually replace them with the easiest foods available: bread, pasta, rice, crackers, cereal, pretzels, chips, and packaged snacks labeled vegan. These are mostly refined starches. Refined starch digests quickly and doesn't keep you full for long, so you're hungry again sooner, and you reach for more.

Repeat that loop all day, and a few things happen. You feel hungrier on the fast than you need to. Your energy rides up and down. Your mood follows. And many people who expected to feel light and clear end the season feeling sluggish and more tired than when they began.

The way out is not to fear carbohydrates. Beans, lentils, potatoes, oats, fruit, and whole grains are wonderful fasting foods. The way out is **pairing**. When you eat starch together with protein and fiber, and with a little fat on oil days, the meal digests more slowly. You stay full longer, and your energy and mood tend to stay steadier.

A SIMPLE TEST

After a fasting meal, notice how you feel two hours later. Calm, steady, not thinking about food? Good pairing. Hungry, tired, or cranky? The meal was probably heavy on refined starch and light on protein and fiber. Adjust the next meal, not your whole life.

Protein: the nutrient that goes missing

Protein keeps you full, protects your muscle, and supports healing and recovery. Meat, fish, eggs, and dairy are the most concentrated sources, so when they leave the table, protein often drops without anyone noticing.

The standard recommendation for healthy adults (the RDA) is about 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day (National Academies; see Notes and Sources). Many people who are older or physically active may do better with somewhat more. Your doctor can help you find the right range for you, especially if you have kidney concerns.

In practical terms, most adults do well aiming for a solid serving of protein at every meal. On the fast, that means building each meal *around* beans, lentils, tofu, tempeh, edamame, or shellfish, not treating them as a side dish. Chapter Four shows how.

Electrolytes

Electrolytes are minerals such as sodium, potassium, and magnesium that help your nerves, muscles, and fluid balance work properly. Two things during a fast can throw them off. First, if you suddenly cut out most packaged and processed foods, your sodium intake may drop. Second, if you eat fewer meals, you take in fewer minerals overall.

The result can be headaches, fatigue, muscle cramps, or lightheadedness, which people often blame on "the fast" itself. Seasoning home-cooked food with a little iodized salt, eating potassium-rich foods like potatoes, beans, bananas, and leafy greens, and drinking enough water often helps a great deal. If

you have high blood pressure, heart or kidney disease, or take medication for blood pressure, talk with your doctor before changing your salt intake.

Sleep

Sleep is one of the most underrated fasting tools. Research suggests that short sleep can increase hunger and cravings the next day, especially for sweets and starches. Short sleep also makes it harder to control your attention and your temper.

Part of the reason appears to be that sleep loss shifts the hormones that signal hunger and fullness and makes deliberate choices harder. A tired body looks for fast energy. A well-rested person simply finds the fast easier, and finds prayer easier, too.

Many fasting seasons also include more church services, some of them in the evening. Plan for that. Protect your sleep on the other nights.

Stress

Stress raises cortisol, a hormone that, among other things, can increase appetite and push you toward comfort foods. Fasting itself is a mild stress on the body. Adding it on top of a high-stress season without any relief can make it feel much harder than it is.

This is where the Eastern and Western views meet beautifully. The West says: manage stress, slow your breathing, take walks, rest. The East says: pray, go to church, read Scripture, make a good confession, and cast your cares on God. These are not competing answers. Slow, quiet prayer often slows the breath and quiets the body as well. A walk can become a walk of prayer. The fast is meant to be lived from peace, not from panic.

Movement

You don't need to stop exercising during a fast, but you may need to adjust. Gentle and moderate movement, like walking, mobility work, and lighter strength training, usually fits well. If you train hard, the extra attention to pro-

tein, salt, and sleep matters even more, and you may need to scale back on the strictest days. Listen to your body, and if you feel faint or unwell, stop and eat.

IN SHORT

- The fast is mostly a plant-based pattern. Eating well inside it takes a little planning.
- Avoid the refined starch trap. Pair carbohydrates with protein and fiber.
- Build every meal around a protein source.
- Mind your salt, potassium, and water.
- Protect your sleep and manage stress with both prayer and practical rest.

CHAPTER FOUR

Building a Fasting Plate

This is where the ideas become dinner. My goal is to give you a simple structure you can use every day of the fast, whatever your rule, without counting every gram.

The basic plate

Picture your plate in four parts:

1. **Half the plate: vegetables.** Leafy greens, broccoli, cabbage, peppers, tomatoes, cauliflower, zucchini, mushrooms, carrots, green beans, onions, and more. Fresh, frozen, roasted, steamed, or in soup.
2. **A quarter of the plate: protein.** Beans, lentils, chickpeas, tofu, tempeh, edamame, or shellfish.
3. **A quarter of the plate: smart starch.** Potatoes, sweet potatoes, oats, brown rice, quinoa, whole-grain bread, or fruit. Beans and lentils count here too, because they are both protein and starch.
4. **On oil days: a little healthy fat.** Olive oil, olives, avocado, nuts, seeds, or tahini.

That's it. If you use this plate at most meals, you have already avoided the biggest fasting mistakes.

Your protein toolbox

Here are the main protein sources for fast days, with rough protein amounts so you can see how they compare. Exact amounts vary by brand and preparation.

FOOD	PORTION	PROTEIN (APPROX.)
Lentils, cooked	1 cup	18 g
Black beans, cooked	1 cup	15 g
Chickpeas, cooked	1 cup	14 g
Edamame, shelled	1 cup	18 g
Firm tofu	6 oz (170 g)	20–28 g
Tempeh	3 oz (85 g)	17 g
Shrimp, cooked	4 oz (113 g)	26 g
Mussels, cooked	4 oz (113 g)	27 g
Pea protein powder	1 scoop	20–25 g
Soy milk, unsweetened	1 cup	7 g

Plant and shellfish protein at a glance.

A few notes:

- **Beans, lentils, and chickpeas** are at the center of traditional fasting food in every Orthodox culture: Greek *fasolada*, Middle Eastern lentil soups, Russian pea soups, Serbian baked beans. Canned beans are fine. Rinse them to reduce the salt, or keep some of it if you need more sodium.
- **Tofu and tempeh** are made from soybeans and are some of the most protein-dense plant foods available. Tempeh is fermented and has a firm, nutty texture. Press tofu before cooking for a better texture.
- **Shellfish** are traditionally permitted on fast days in most Byzantine practice (customs vary, so ask your priest), and they are excellent sources of protein. They were traditionally simple, cheap food of the poor. Clams, mussels, and oysters are also some of the richest food sources of vitamin B12, which matters a lot during a long fast. Stick to plain, low-cost options: frozen shrimp and canned clams make this easy and affordable.

- **Protein powder** made from pea, soy, or rice protein is a convenient backup when you are short on time. Check the label for dairy ingredients like whey or casein, which are not fasting foods.

Cooking without oil

How oil is kept on strict days varies by jurisdiction. Some pastors, for example in the Antiochian tradition, teach that fasting from olive oil is a monastic practice, not expected of laypeople. Follow your priest. If your rule sets oil aside, here are easy ways to cook well without it:

- **Water or broth sauté.** Start onions and garlic in a few tablespoons of water or vegetable broth instead of oil. Add more liquid as it evaporates.
- **Roast on parchment.** Vegetables roast nicely on parchment paper. Season them generously.
- **Soups and stews.** These are the easiest meals to make on a strict day. Flavor comes from onion, garlic, herbs, tomato, lemon, and spices.
- **Bright flavors.** Lemon juice, vinegar, mustard, salsa, hot sauce, fresh herbs, and soy sauce make simple food taste alive.

Whether foods that naturally contain oil, such as nuts, olives, and avocado, are eaten on strict days varies between traditions. In many places nuts and seeds are allowed and only the oil itself is set aside. Others are stricter. Follow your parish and your priest.

A sample strict day

No meat, dairy, eggs, fish, oil, or wine. Shellfish where your rule allows.

> **Breakfast. Savory tofu scramble.** Crumble firm tofu into a nonstick pan with a splash of vegetable broth, chopped onion, spinach, turmeric, garlic powder, salt, and pepper. Top with salsa. Serve with a piece of fruit.

Lunch. Big lentil soup. Lentils simmered with onion, carrot, celery, garlic, crushed tomatoes, cumin, and a bay leaf, with lemon squeezed in at the end. A side salad of greens with lemon juice, vinegar, and herbs.

Afternoon. Edamame. A cup of steamed edamame with a pinch of iodized salt, and a glass of water.

Dinner. Shrimp and vegetable stir-fry. Shrimp, broccoli, peppers, and snap peas "steam-fried" in broth with ginger, garlic, and soy sauce. Serve over a modest scoop of brown rice.

If you get hungry in the evening: a cup of warm unsweetened soy milk with cinnamon, or an apple.

A sample oil day

Strict, but with olive oil and wine allowed.

Breakfast. Oats with protein. Oats cooked in soy milk, a scoop of pea protein stirred in at the end, berries on top, and a sprinkle of walnuts.

Lunch. Mediterranean chickpea bowl. Chickpeas, quinoa, cucumber, tomato, red onion, parsley, and Kalamata olives, dressed with olive oil, lemon, and a spoonful of tahini. A scoop of hummus on the side.

Afternoon. Apple and almond butter. Sliced apple with a tablespoon of almond butter.

Dinner. Tempeh and roasted vegetables. Tempeh marinated in soy sauce, garlic, and lemon, then roasted with potatoes, carrots, and zucchini tossed in olive oil and oregano. A glass of wine if your rule allows it.

On **fish days**, simply add a serving of fish such as salmon, cod, or sardines to the oil-day pattern. On **fast-free days and feasts**, enjoy the feast with gratitude. The Church feasts as seriously as it fasts.

Make-ahead habits

The person who fasts well usually has food ready before hunger arrives. A few habits make a big difference:

- **Cook a pot of beans or lentils twice a week.** Use them in soups, bowls, salads, and wraps.
- **Make one big soup on Sunday.** It covers several lunches.
- **Wash and chop vegetables in advance.** If they are ready to eat, you will eat them.
- **Keep emergency protein on hand.** Canned beans, canned clams, frozen shrimp, shelf-stable tofu, roasted chickpeas, and protein powder.

A short shopping list

PROTEIN

- Dry or canned lentils, black beans, chickpeas
- Firm or extra-firm tofu; tempeh
- Frozen shelled edamame
- Frozen shrimp; canned clams or mussels
- Unsweetened soy milk
- Plant protein powder (dairy-free)

VEGETABLES AND FRUIT

- Onions, garlic, carrots, celery
- Spinach, kale, or mixed greens
- Broccoli, peppers, zucchini, cabbage
- Frozen mixed vegetables
- Crushed tomatoes; salsa
- Potatoes, sweet potatoes
- Apples, bananas, berries, lemons

GRAINS AND PANTRY

- Rolled oats; brown rice; quinoa
- Whole-grain bread (check for milk or eggs)
- Vegetable broth
- Soy sauce, mustard, vinegar, hot sauce
- Cumin, oregano, turmeric, bay leaves, cinnamon
- Iodized salt

FOR OIL DAYS

- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Kalamata olives; avocados
- Walnuts, almonds, almond butter
- Tahini; hummus

READ THE LABELS

Many packaged foods hide milk, eggs, butter, whey, or gelatin (an animal product). Look for words like *whey*, *casein*, *milk solids*, *butter*, *egg*, and *gelatin* on breads, crackers, cereals, and protein bars. Products labeled "vegan" are dairy- and egg-free, but they can still be highly processed. Simple whole foods are usually the better choice.

IN SHORT

- Half vegetables, a quarter protein, a quarter smart starch, plus healthy fat on oil days.
- Build every meal around beans, lentils, tofu, tempeh, edamame, or shellfish.
- Cook with water and broth on strict days.
- Prepare food before hunger hits.

CHAPTER FIVE

Supplements That Fill the Gaps

Let me say this plainly before anything else: **supplements can be helpful, but they are never required and never the starting point.**

The starting point is food, sleep, prayer, and a good plan. Christians kept the fasts faithfully for centuries before anyone could buy a vitamin. A supplement cannot make up for a plate of crackers, and it certainly cannot make up for a fast without prayer.

That said, a long plant-based season can leave a few predictable gaps, and modern nutrition gives us simple ways to cover them. This chapter walks through the main ones in order of importance.

BEFORE YOU START ANYTHING

Talk with your doctor or pharmacist before adding supplements, especially if you take prescription medication, are pregnant or nursing, or have a chronic health condition. Some supplements interact with medications. Basic bloodwork can show what you actually need, so you aren't guessing. Ask about vitamin B12, vitamin D, and an iron panel including ferritin.

Many people also wonder whether supplements are permitted on fast days. Ask your own priest.

1. Vitamin B12: the most important one

If you take one thing seriously in this chapter, make it B12.

Vitamin B12 helps your body make healthy red blood cells and keeps your nerves working properly. It is found almost entirely in animal foods: meat, fish, eggs, and dairy. Plants do not reliably provide it. Over a long period of plant-based eating, B12 levels can slowly fall. Because your body stores B12, the drop can take a long time to show up, which is exactly why it is easy to miss. Low B12 can eventually cause tiredness, weakness, tingling in the hands or feet, and problems with memory and mood.

Since the Orthodox fast covers about half the year, many people who fast seriously benefit from paying attention to B12. Shellfish such as clams and mussels help a great deal on days you eat them. Fortified foods, such as some soy milks and nutritional yeast, can also help. A B12 or B-complex supplement is a simple, low-cost backup. Your doctor can check your level and suggest a dose. Ask about B12 especially if you are over 50, or if you take metformin or an acid-reducing medicine long term, since these can lower B12 levels (NIH Office of Dietary Supplements; see Notes and Sources).

2. Vitamin D

Vitamin D supports bones, muscles, and the immune system. Your skin makes it from sunlight, and fatty fish and fortified dairy are the main food sources. Two of the biggest fasting seasons, the Nativity Fast and Great Lent, fall in the darker months, when sunlight is weaker and people spend more time indoors. Fish and dairy are off the table at the same time.

That combination makes vitamin D worth a look. A simple blood test tells you where you stand. Fortified soy milk helps a little. If your level is low, your doctor can recommend a supplement and dose. Many vitamin D3 supplements are made from lanolin (sheep's wool); vitamin D2 and lichen-based D3 are plant-based options if that matters to your rule.

3. Omega-3 fats from algae

Omega-3 fats called EPA and DHA support heart and brain health. The main food source is fatty fish like salmon and sardines, which are only allowed on fish days.

Plant foods like flax, chia, and walnuts contain a different omega-3 called ALA. Your body can convert a small amount of ALA into EPA and DHA, but not very much. If you don't eat fish often, an **algae-based omega-3** supplement is a good option. It provides EPA and DHA directly. In fact, algae is where fish get their omega-3s in the first place. Because it comes from algae, it generally fits within the fast, but check the capsule: many softgels are made with gelatin, an animal product, and plant-based capsules are available. If you take blood-thinning medication, check with your doctor first.

4. Magnesium and electrolytes

As we saw in Chapter Three, changes in sodium, potassium, and magnesium can cause headaches, cramps, poor sleep, and fatigue during a fast.

Food comes first. Beans, lentils, leafy greens, nuts, seeds, and whole grains are good sources of magnesium. Potatoes, bananas, beans, and greens provide potassium. Most people get plenty of sodium. If you have cut out most packaged foods, a little iodized salt on home-cooked food is usually enough.

Some people find a magnesium supplement helpful, often taken in the evening. A sugar-free electrolyte drink can help on long service days or after exercise. If you have kidney disease, heart disease, or high blood pressure, ask your doctor before using magnesium or electrolyte products.

5. Iron: only if bloodwork shows a need

Iron carries oxygen in your blood. Plant foods like lentils, beans, tofu, spinach, and pumpkin seeds contain iron, but it is a form the body absorbs less easily than the iron in meat. Shellfish, especially clams and oysters, are rich sources.

You can absorb more plant iron with a simple trick: **eat it with vitamin C**. A squeeze of lemon on lentils, peppers in a bean salad, or strawberries with oatmeal all help. Coffee and tea can reduce iron absorption, so try to drink them between meals instead of with them.

Do not take iron supplements unless bloodwork shows you need them. Too much iron can be harmful, and some people store iron too easily without knowing it. Let your doctor decide this one.

A word on calcium and iodine

Two more nutrients are worth knowing about, though food usually covers them. **Calcium** normally comes from dairy, so on the fast look for tofu made with calcium sulfate, fortified soy milk, leafy greens like kale and bok choy, and tahini. **Iodine** comes mainly from dairy, fish, and seafood. Using iodized salt at home (most sea salt is not iodized) and eating shellfish now and then helps cover it. Needs for iodine rise during pregnancy and nursing.

A word about products

You don't need any particular brand to fast well, and no product is part of the fast itself. If you and your doctor decide a supplement makes sense, choose a reputable one, check the label for dairy, fish, or gelatin if that matters to your rule, and keep it simple. Many people fast faithfully their whole lives without taking anything. If supplements don't fit your situation, you are not missing anything essential to a holy fast.

IN SHORT

- Food first. Supplements can be helpful, but are never required and never the starting point.
- B12 is the biggest gap during a long fast.
- Check vitamin D, especially in winter.
- Consider algae-based omega-3 if you rarely eat fish.
- Use food, salt, and possibly magnesium for electrolytes.
- Take iron only if bloodwork shows a need.
- Always check with your doctor, and ask your priest if you're unsure.

CHAPTER SIX

Mindset: Fasting the Heart

Everything so far has been about food. This chapter is about the part of the fast that matters most. A person can follow every food rule perfectly and still miss the fast. Another person can stumble with the food and still grow closer to God. The difference lives in the heart.

Fasting the tongue

St. Basil and many other Fathers taught that fasting from food is incomplete if we keep feeding on gossip, anger, and complaint. The fast of the tongue may be the hardest fast of all.

Here are a few practical ways to keep it:

- **Speak less, especially when you're hungry.** Hunger makes many people irritable. If you notice that, choose fewer words.
- **Refuse to gossip.** When a conversation turns to someone who isn't present, change the subject or stay quiet.
- **Hold back the complaint.** Including complaints about the fast itself.
- **Say kind things on purpose.** Replace a harsh word with an encouraging one.

It works the same way it does with food. Every time you hold back a cutting word, you strengthen the habit of self-control, and you make space for kindness to take its place.

Fasting the passions

Remember that the passions are desires that have become masters. Food is the training ground, but the real target is wider: anger, envy, pride, greed, lust, laziness, and despair.

A helpful practice is to choose one passion for the season. Maybe it is anger, or envy, or the habit of judging others. Name it honestly in prayer and in confession. Then, each time you feel hunger during the fast, use it as a reminder to watch for that passion. Hunger becomes a bell that calls you back to attention. In this way you link a feeling you will have many times a day to the thing you most want to change, so you remember it often.

The Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian, prayed throughout Great Lent, puts the whole program into a few lines. In the translation used by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America:

> *O Lord and Master of my life! Take from me the spirit of sloth, faintheartedness, lust of power, and idle talk. But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant. Yea, Lord and King! Grant me to see my own errors and not to judge my brother, for Thou art blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.*

A rhythm of prayer

Build prayer into the fast from the beginning. It doesn't need to be long. It needs to be regular.

- **Morning and evening prayers.** Use a prayer book or the prayers your priest recommends. Even five quiet minutes, kept daily, is a real rule.
- **Prayer before and after meals.** A short prayer turns every meal, however simple, into thanksgiving.
- **The Jesus Prayer.** "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This short prayer is at the heart of Orthodox spiritual life. You can pray it quietly while driving, walking, cooking, or waiting in line. Many people use a prayer rope to keep their attention. It is especially helpful in a

moment of temptation, whether to food, anger, or anything else. Ask your priest how best to use it.

- **The services.** Fasting seasons come with special services: the Great Canon of St. Andrew and the Presanctified Liturgy in Great Lent, the Paraklesis services during the Dormition Fast, and vespers throughout the year. Go when you can. The services give the fast its shape and its joy.
- **Scripture.** A chapter of the Gospels or Psalms each day is a beautiful companion to the fast.

When you slip

You will slip. Everyone does. You'll eat the cheese at the work party, forget it's Wednesday, or eat far more than you meant to. How you handle that moment matters more than the slip itself.

The Western psychology of habits has a useful observation here. People often treat one mistake as proof of failure: "I've already blown it, so I might as well give up." That all-or-nothing thinking does far more damage than the original slip. The Church's answer goes deeper. It is repentance (in Greek, *metanoia*), a change of heart that turns us back to God.

So when you slip, follow three steps:

1. **Confess.** Tell God honestly in prayer right away, and bring it to confession if it weighs on you. No drama. No self-hatred.
2. **Next meal.** Return to the fast at the very next meal, not next week or next Monday.
3. **Keep going.** One slip does not undo a season. Remember St. John Chrysostom's Paschal Homily: the feast welcomes those who came at the eleventh hour too.

Notice what is *not* on that list: punishing yourself, skipping meals to "make up for it," or quitting. Those responses come from pride, not humility. A humble person simply gets up and keeps walking.

A CAUTION ABOUT RESTRICTION

If you have a history of disordered eating, or you notice that the fast is becoming about control, guilt, or your body size rather than about God, please talk with your priest and your doctor right away. A gentler rule is not a lesser fast. Your priest can give you a form of fasting that protects your health and still draws you toward God.

Secrecy versus pride

Christ told us to fast in secret, and pride is the quiet danger of every fast. Here are some signs it might be creeping in:

- Feeling superior to people who aren't fasting, or who fast less strictly.
- Watching other people's plates.
- Talking about your fast more than necessary.
- Taking pride in how strict you are.

The cure is humility, and humility is practical. If someone offers you food in their home, remember that the sayings of the Desert Fathers tell of elders who quietly set aside their own fast to welcome a guest with love. Many priests advise accepting hospitality graciously and quietly. Ask your priest ahead of time how to handle these moments. And never judge another person's fast. You do not know their rule, their health, or their heart.

Community

Orthodox Christians do not fast alone. The whole Church fasts together, and that makes it easier. Some practical ways to lean on community:

- **Share fasting meals.** Many parishes have Lenten potlucks or soup suppers. Go, and bring something.
- **Swap recipes** with other families in the parish.
- **Fast as a household.** It is much easier when the whole kitchen follows the same rhythm, adjusted for each person's needs.

- **Find a fasting friend.** Not to compare notes on strictness, but to encourage each other and pray for each other.

Western habit tools, in service of prayer

Western psychology has studied how habits form, and some of its tools fit well within the fast, as long as we remember they are tools serving a spiritual purpose, not the purpose itself.

Habit stacking. Attach a new habit to one you already have. The mechanism: the existing habit acts as a reliable trigger, so you don't have to remember the new one on your own. For example, "After I pour my morning coffee, I'll say my morning prayers." Or "When I sit down to eat, I'll pray before I pick up my fork."

Environment design. Make the right choice the easy choice. The mechanism: we tend to eat what is visible and convenient, so changing what is visible changes what we eat. Before the fast, move non-fasting foods out of sight or out of the house if your household agrees, and put washed fruit, cooked beans, and soup in front. Put your prayer book and prayer rope somewhere you'll see them every morning.

If-then plans. Decide in advance what you'll do in a hard moment. When the decision is already made, you don't have to fight a fresh battle when you're tired or hungry. "If I'm offered dessert at work, then I'll say, 'No, thank you, I'm all set.'" "If I feel the urge to snack at 3 p.m., then I'll drink a glass of water and pray the Jesus Prayer ten times."

Track the rhythm, not the scale. If you track anything, track your prayer rule, your church attendance, and your acts of almsgiving. That keeps your attention on what the fast is really for.

IN SHORT

- Fast from harsh words as well as food.
- Choose one passion to work on, and let hunger remind you.
- Keep a simple, regular prayer rule, including the Jesus Prayer.
- When you slip: confess, next meal, keep going.
- Fast quietly and never judge another person's fast.
- Use habit tools to support prayer, never to replace it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Seven-Day Starter Rhythm

This chapter turns everything into a simple week. You can use it in the days just before a fasting season, or during the first week of one. Each day has one body step and one soul step. That's all. Small steps, kept faithfully, will carry you further than a big plan you abandon in a week.

Before you begin, talk with your priest about your rule for the season, and with your doctor if you have any health concerns.

Day 1. Prepare

BODY: Clear the kitchen. Move non-fasting foods out of the way, and make your shopping list using Chapter Four.

SOUL: Write down your intention for the season in one sentence. Then name the one passion you most want to work on.

Day 2. Stock

BODY: Shop, then cook a big pot of beans or lentils and one soup. Wash and chop vegetables for the next few days.

SOUL: Set your prayer rule. Choose a time, a place, and a length you can actually keep. Put your prayer book or prayer rope where you will see it.

Day 3. Build the plate

BODY: Use the basic plate at every meal today: half vegetables, a quarter protein, a quarter smart starch. Notice how you feel two hours after each meal.

SOUL: Pray before and after every meal, even if it's just a few words of thanks.

Day 4. Mind the basics

BODY: Check your water, salt, and sleep. Aim to be in bed early enough to get a full night's rest.

SOUL: Pray the Jesus Prayer for five quiet minutes. Then use it whenever you feel hunger or irritation during the day.

Day 5. Guard the tongue

BODY: Prepare tomorrow's meals tonight, so a busy day doesn't push you toward the bread and pasta trap.

SOUL: Fast from complaint and gossip today. If you slip, simply start again.

Day 6. Give

BODY: Make an extra portion of soup or a simple fasting meal.

SOUL: Give it away, or give the money you saved this week to someone in need. Let your fast feed someone else.

Day 7. Worship and rest

BODY: Rest. Enjoy whatever your rule allows for the day, with gratitude.

SOUL: Go to church. If it fits, schedule a confession for the season. Look back at the week: what helped, what was hard, and what one thing you'll adjust next week.

After the first week

Keep the parts that worked and repeat them. Most people find that by the second or third week, the fast feels much more natural. The kitchen has a rhythm, the body has adjusted, and the mind is freer for prayer. If it still feels very hard, that is useful information to bring to your priest and, if needed, your doctor. Adjusting your rule with their blessing is wisdom, not weakness.



A Closing Word

Thank you for spending this time with me.

If you remember only a few things from this book, let them be these. The fast is spiritual first. It belongs with prayer and almsgiving. It is kept in humility and in obedience to your priest. And the body you bring to the fast is a gift from God, worth caring for with good food, good rest, and good sense.

The East teaches us why we fast: to be freed from the passions, to grow in watchfulness, and to draw near to God. The West offers some practical help along the way: build meals around protein, pair your carbohydrates, mind your salt and sleep, cover the gaps that bloodwork shows, and use simple habit tools to support your prayer. When the two work together, the fast becomes something you can live with joy rather than just endure.

You will not keep it perfectly. No one does. When you fall, get up. Confess, eat the next meal well, and keep going. The feast is coming, and everyone is invited.

May your fast be blessed, and may it lead you to a joyful feast.

Jeremy Robinson



Where a Priest Reviewer Corrected Me

I sent an early draft of this book to a few Orthodox priests and asked them to tell me, plainly, what I'd gotten wrong. I'm a coach, not a priest, and I didn't want to leave something in print that was almost right.

An Orthodox priest here in Austin who reviewed the draft sent me a handful of clear, gentle notes. I was close on each of the points below, and he helped me get closer. I'm showing the corrections here, because I think it's good for people to see where I was almost right and then corrected.

If other clergy reviews bring more corrections, I'll add them here the same way.

Oil

What I first wrote. "Oil: traditionally olive oil, and in many places all cooking oils." Later, in the cooking chapter, I also wrote, "Strict days mean no oil, which surprises many people."

What a priest reviewer pointed out. How oil is kept varies by jurisdiction. Some pastors, for example in the Antiochian tradition, teach that fasting from olive oil is a monastic practice, not expected of laypeople. The traditional texts name olive oil, and other oils have been used for a long time.

What I changed and why. I dropped the phrase "in many places all cooking oils." I now say that practice differs, and that you should follow your priest.

The oil-free cooking tips are still in Chapter Four, as an option for anyone whose rule sets oil aside. I had written the strictest version I knew as if it were the usual one. It isn't, not everywhere, and not for everyone.

Wine

What I first wrote. "Wine: in practice, usually all alcoholic drinks."

What a priest reviewer pointed out. The traditional texts name wine. Customs differ on other alcoholic drinks, so that is a question for your priest.

What I changed and why. I now say what the texts actually say, and I send you to your priest for the rest. I had turned a word about wine into a rule about every kind of drink, and that went further than the texts.

Shellfish

What I first wrote. I listed shellfish such as shrimp, scallops, mussels, clams, oysters, squid, and octopus, and I wrote, "Many priests also encourage keeping them simple rather than turning a fast day into a seafood feast."

What a priest reviewer pointed out. Shellfish was traditionally simple, cheap food of the poor, and easy to get around the Mediterranean. Today the same foods can look like a luxury, which misses the spirit of the fast.

What I changed and why. I kept the advice to keep it simple, and I added the reason. The examples now lean toward plain, low-cost options such as frozen shrimp and canned clams, not a seafood feast.

Health

What I first wrote. "If you take medication for diabetes or blood pressure, or are pregnant, nursing, or have a history of an eating disorder, talk to your doctor and your priest before changing how you eat."

What a priest reviewer pointed out. The fasting guidelines assume good health. Anyone with a medical condition, including pregnancy, nursing, diabetes, or allergies, should talk with their doctor and their priest. Those needs are always taken into consideration.

What I changed and why. I made that assumption clear, and I added allergies to the list. The book already sent you to your doctor and your priest. I wanted the reason to be just as clear: a gentler rule for health is normal, not a lesser fast.



Important Health Note

This book is for general education and spiritual encouragement. It is not medical advice, and it does not diagnose, treat, or cure any condition. It makes no promises about weight loss or any other health outcome. Everyone's body and situation are different.

The fasting guidelines assume good health. Anyone with a medical condition, pregnancy, nursing, diabetes, or allergies should talk with their doctor and their priest.

Talk with your doctor before changing how you eat or starting any supplement, and especially if any of these apply to you:

- You take medication for diabetes.
  - **Insulin and sulfonylureas** (such as glipizide, glyburide, or glimepiride) can cause dangerously low blood sugar if you eat fewer meals, delay meals (including the morning fast before Holy Communion), or eat fewer carbohydrates.
  - **SGLT2 inhibitors** (such as empagliflozin, dapagliflozin, or canagliflozin) carry a risk of a serious condition called ketoacidosis during prolonged fasting or very low food intake.
  - **GLP-1 medicines** (such as semaglutide, liraglutide, or tirzepatide) already reduce appetite, so make sure you still eat enough protein and drink enough fluids.
  - **Metformin** taken long term can lower vitamin B12 levels. Ask your doctor about checking yours.
- You take medication for blood pressure, or have heart or kidney disease. Changes in salt, potassium, and magnesium can matter.

- You take blood thinners or other prescription medication that may interact with supplements.
- You are pregnant, trying to become pregnant, or nursing. Needs rise for several nutrients that are harder to get on the fast, including vitamin B12, iodine, DHA (an omega-3 fat), choline, and iron. Your doctor or a registered dietitian can help you plan, and many priests give expectant and nursing mothers a gentler rule.
- You have allergies, including food allergies.
- You have a history of an eating disorder or disordered eating.
- You are under 18, elderly, recovering from illness or surgery, or do heavy physical work.

Talk with your priest or spiritual father about how strictly to fast. The Church has always made room for health needs, and a rule given in obedience is a faithful fast.

If you feel faint, dizzy, confused, or unwell during a fast, stop and eat, and seek medical care if symptoms do not quickly improve.



A Short Glossary

Cheesefare Week. The last week before Great Lent. Meat is set aside, but dairy, eggs, and fish are still eaten. It ends on Cheesefare Sunday, also called Forgiveness Sunday.

Clean Monday. The first day of Great Lent, the Monday after Forgiveness Sunday.

Dormition. The "falling asleep" of the Theotokos, celebrated on August 15 and prepared for by the Dormition Fast.

Economia. The Church's pastoral practice of applying its rules with mercy and flexibility for the good of a particular person, for example in illness, pregnancy, or old age. In everyday life it is exercised through your priest or spiritual father.

Pascha. The feast of Christ's Resurrection (Easter). The word comes from the Hebrew word for Passover.

Paraklesis. A service of supplication, most often to the Theotokos, sung frequently during the Dormition Fast.

Presanctified Liturgy. The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, an evening Lenten service, usually on Wednesdays and Fridays, at which Holy Communion is given from Gifts consecrated at an earlier Divine Liturgy.

Theophany. The feast of Christ's baptism in the Jordan, celebrated on January 6.

Theotokos. "God-bearer," the Church's title for the Virgin Mary, affirmed at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Notes and Sources

SCRIPTURE AND THE FATHERS

- Scripture is quoted from the New King James Version® (Thomas Nelson, 1982).
- The *Didache* (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), chapter 8, directs Christians to fast on Wednesday and Friday.
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- Fr. Alexander Schmemann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), chapter 2, "Bright Sadness."
- The Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian is quoted in the translation published by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (goarch.org).
- *The Philokalia* was compiled by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth and first published in Venice in 1782.

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- Institute of Medicine (National Academies). *Dietary Reference Intakes for Energy, Carbohydrate, Fiber, Fat, Fatty Acids, Cholesterol, Protein, and Amino Acids*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2005. (Source of the protein RDA of 0.8 g/kg/day.)

- NIH Office of Dietary Supplements, health professional fact sheets on vitamin B12, vitamin D, iodine, choline, iron, and omega-3 fatty acids (ods.od.nih.gov).

WESTERN PRACTICE

- The Roman Catholic Lenten rule described in Chapter One follows the Code of Canon Law (canons 1250–1253) and the norms of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

About the Author

Jeremy Robinson is a holistic coach who has been helping people with nutrition, movement, and lasting habits since 2001. In 2015 he opened Austin Holistic Fitness & Nutrition in Austin, Texas, where he coaches clients to care for the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. His approach blends practical, science-informed nutrition with patience, encouragement, and respect for each person's faith and life. He writes as a coach, not as a member of the clergy, and encourages every reader to follow the guidance of their own priest or pastor.

QUESTIONS OR CORRECTIONS?

Jeremy welcomes them, especially from clergy and health professionals.
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