

THE SETTLEMENT OF CANONIC TRADITION IN THE DOCUMENT “THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING AND ITS OBSERVANCE TODAY”

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ABSTRACT. In this paper we will try to showcase, during the first part, the challenges of the contemporary world and the importance of fasting, and during the second part, we will see how the canonical tradition about fasting was established in the document *The Importance of fasting and its observance today* approved by the Holy and Great Council that took place in Crete.

Keywords: fasting, Holy and Great Council, Tradition of the Orthodox Church, Canon Law, canons.

Preliminaries

The preaching of the Gospel “to all the people” (Matthew 28,19) was assigned to the Apostles, and they set out Christian communities, for which they ordained bishops and priests¹.

Due to elementary and natural reasons, these communities, organized at the beginning in local and territorial ecclesiastical communities, that were performing their cultic activity on the one hand under the Hebrew influence, following a series of the prescriptions of the old Laws, and on the other hand, following their own convictions, appeared from the customs and practices specific to every nation. Sometimes these local practices appeared due to the culturalization of the Gospel to generate conflicts between the faithful of different communities, a fact that was mentioned in the apostolic era, when the Holy Apostles, gathered at the synod in Jerusalem, set valid principles for all the Christians (Facts 15).

These norms stand for the totality of principles and norms that the Messiah gave to the Holy Apostles, and they were at the basis of the administrative and territorial organization of the ecclesiastical units, of the cultic life and of the

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¹ N. Dură, *Biserica în primele patru secole. Organizarea și bazele ei canonice, Ortodoxia XXXIV*, no. 3 (1982): 462.

Church management, ensuring its durability and independence² compared to the secular laws, because the one who set it is present and works through it till the end of centuries (Matthew 28,20), and its purpose is not an earthly, passing one but one soteriological.³

However, the local churches “established in an ethnic and geographic framework”⁴ and their own customs by law played a key role in setting out their conviction, in the completion of the cultic life and the administrative organization, as intrinsic parties of the Universal Church.

One of the practices related to the cultic life, that required clarifications on the part of the Church, is the one related to the institution of fasting that we are going to talk about in this presentation.

This institution on the one hand, developed in relation to the Christian holidays for which a certain spiritual preparation was required through prayers, through different forms of abstinence and fasting⁵, within a complete liturgic cycle (the ecclesiastic year), also within the one restricted liturgic (fasting days during the week and on certain holidays), and on the other hand, by canons the Church described the way in which people must fast, the period and the type of fasting.

Fasting was defined by theologians as “total or partial abstinence from good and abundant food, in particular animal food. This is a bodily sacrifice that should be unified with benefaction, with incense gifts, candles etc., brought to the sanctuary, as well as with prayers, bows... Fasting is the best way to conquer ourselves and based on this victory, we will conquer also the world put in the service of sin and of the conspiracies of devil”⁶.

Below, we will not stop on the clarifications of fasting, but we will try to showcase, during the first part, the challenges of the contemporary world and the importance of fasting, and during the second part, we will see how the canonical tradition about fasting was established in the document *The Importance of fasting and its observance nowadays* approved by the Holy and Great Synod.

² I. S. Berednicov, *Curs de drept Bisericesc*, trans. Silvestru Bălănescu, bishop of Huși (Bucharest: Typography „Cărților Bisericești”, 1892), 3.

³ Veaceslav Goreanu, “Postul în tradiția canonică a Bisericii Răsăritului”, *Luminătorul* 86, no. 5 (2006): 10 - 22.

⁴ Nicolae Dură, *Biserica în primele patru secole*, p. 453.

⁵ Ioan N. Floca, *Drept canonic ortodox, legislație și administrație bisericească*, vol. II (Bucharest: E.I.B.M.B.O.R., 1990), 159.

⁶ Nicodim Sachelarie, *Pravila bisericească*, third edition (Bucharest, Publishing House Parish Valea Plopului, 1999), 382-383; Ioan Zăgărean, *Morala creștină, manual pentru seminariile teologice* (Bucharest, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., 1990), 211-212.

The Challenges of the Contemporary World and the Importance of Fasting

Contemporary society is marked by a profound crisis existing at all levels: religious, social, cultural, economic, political etc. This is due to the fact that the man of our days struggles in his aspiration toward absolute freedom, putting his trust in the richness and the possibilities of his rationale, breaking in this way the metaphysical and religious connections with the Creator and Center of the world, him becoming this center: „the ego of the modern man who pretends himself to be autonomous, because he does not admit any other power beyond the boundaries of mankind... The man of the XXIst century no longer believes in God, because this God can no longer exist together with his autonomous ego, because this man is his own God”⁷. In order to overcome this crisis, it is necessary that man come back and respect the Truth revealed, as well as the order of the Church, including the precepts related to fasting.

Set for good by the ecclesiastical authority, fasts stood for a living reality in the spiritual life of Christians. This practice became mandatory for any good Christian, as can be seen in the second ecclesiastical commandment: “Let us keep all the fasts during the year”, fasting being considered as a means of moral and salvation perfection. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, some Christians in the west, the Roman Catholics reduced fasting, easing the exigences related to method and duration (allowing dairy products to be consumed during all the fasts), and the protestants nearly abolished it, unlike the Orthodox Church, that remained faithful to its traditional practice.

These realities, that marked the eastern and western worlds, determined this during the latter decades of the last century, under the influence of ideologies and of the life philosophy of more and more Christians, to analyse once again the issue of observing the canons, considering them *outdated* and inadequate to ecclesiastical life. Very few, faithful to the tradition, having a conservatory vision, understood to apply the canons, and not in their spirit⁸. Starting from this vision we can talk about *two trends* related to the matter of fasting: *a liberal one*, that tends to reduce the rigour of fasting and adapt it to the social life that has become more and more secularized. A second trend is the *conservatory one*, that imposes the observance of fasts as they were commanded by the Church in the first millenium.

Based on these preoccupations, it was noticed that not only the Church recommends fasting, but also doctors sometimes prescribe the dietetic regime

⁷ Nicolae Balcă, *Criza spirituală modernă și cauzele ei* (Suceava Typography of the Monastery „Sfântul Ioan cel Nou”, 2005), 13-14.

⁸ Nicolai N. Afanasiev, *Canoane și conștiință canonică* (Galați: Egumenița, 2005), 5-33.

to the sick. Even nutritionists and aestheticians recommend the consumption of certain foods in order to regain the health and beauty of the body⁹.

Many people understood the need for an alimentary regime for physical health, some of them becoming *vegetarians or vegans*, focusing on the hygienic or medical role. Now, Christian fasting does not refer only to this, but has a much more profound significance, the vegetal food having a deeper understanding and a special use for the one who is keeping the fast according to the order of the Church. The religious fast means much more than being vegetarian or vegan, and abstinence from the animal products does not equate by itself to fasting. Vegetal foods predispose the body to prayer and vigil, while animal products, that are related to blood and fat, effeminate a man's body and waken in him selfish desires. As a matter of fact, nowadays, due to medical reasons, and not necessarily from religious reasons, being a vegetarian became a fashion, that in restaurants and other places, people respect more and more the wish of those who are vegetarians, namely they never eat meat. The faithful have at hand the ecclesiastical Calendar and can be informed in terms of the fasting days during the year, finding detailed rules in the cult books, that, at the end of every liturgic day, mention the specific dispensations for the respective day¹⁰.

Some people *invoke as an impediment to observing fasts age and disease* (children, youngsters, old people), others *the high costs* of the bio products or of the substitutes or soya products (milk, cheese, proteins etc. – are more expensive and more difficult to prepare), as well as *the pace of life and jobs* that do not allow them to prepare their food at home. We must remember that in Romania, and also in many countries of eastern Europe, appeared fast foods or supermarkets where you can find ready-made food, or restaurants, a fact that drives some people not to keep the fasts.

Fasting is not the same in all countries, because not all people have the same way of living nor the same conditions of living. In some orthodox countries, due to the fact that during fasting you cannot eat meat, some canteens specialized and created such delicious dishes, that they are infinitely preferred to food that includes meat, eggs and dairy products.

Taking into account these changes, of influences from the outside world, of weakening conviction and practicing religious life, we reached a point where more Christians fast only when they want to take Communion or in the big fasts in the first and the last week. To this mindset contributed, the atheist regime in eastern Europe, but also secularization in the west. Thus, people want to modify the

⁹ Constantin Pavel, "Posturile rânduite de Biserica Ortodoxă în condițiile de viață actuale ale credincioșilor", *Studii Teologice*, no. 5-8 (1977): 433; V. Predeanu, *Știința, credința și postul* (Bucharest: Typography Grivița, 1903), 26-30.

¹⁰ See Mineiele, Octoiuhul, Penticostarul, Triodul etc.

order of fasting, and some priests to absolve undue fasting, considering it a reminder of the monarchical influence from the Byzantine period, forgetting about the canonic doctrine of the Church.

Another issue is related to the *order of the Holy Apostles fasting* that can have a longer or shorter period, according to the calendar that the faithful have in different countries (the Patriarchies of Jerusalem, Russia, Yugoslavia, Georgia and Mount Athos did not modify the calendar), where this fasting can be longer than the Great Fasting. Although this issue has been much debated, this was debated and solved at the panorthodox level once with the issue of the calendar.

We notice that *in some countries the faithful impart without fasting, without confessing and without necessary preparation (Greece, Serbia etc.)*, and in others they get to confess and impart quite rarely (Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Georgia etc.), only when they get married or in the Great Fasting. We must say that they do this not because of the Church, but because they are called and {defrocked ???} by the clerks from parishes or through different methods of modern pastoral care (radio, television, magazines, ecclesiastical newspapers, Facebook pages, orthodox websites (personal, parochial and diocesan), but due to their separation from Church. *The conscience of belonging to a community disappeared together with the need for active participation in the life of the Church*, in particular in the big cities where there are parishes with a large number of faithful, and the priests do not get to know them and take care of their catechization. Very often, in particular in cities, the faithful come to church, pray and fast only when they have events in the family (baptism, wedding or funeral) or when they are constrained by suffering, having few preoccupations for a spiritual life.

There are some faithful who from their own initiative and without the blessing of their confessor keep a very serious fasting, even more serious than that in monasteries, a fact that can have negative consequences for their spiritual life.

Preoccupied to increase the correct understanding of the role of fasts in the life of the faithful, the autocephalous Churches, based on the right to make some specifications related to the fasting, to set up fasting days for certain situations or to make waivers for certain categories of faithful, they occasionally gave synodal precepts related to how to keep a fast, showing all the time tolerance in terms of fasting that children, old people and women after giving birth must keep.

To this end, in the Encyclic of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1907, it was stated that “the Holy Synod, taking care of the salvation of the souls of the faithful entrusted to his parish and wanting to keep his sons in a good state of health, believes that P.S. Chiriarhi, thinking about the circumstances of the social life in the life of the Romanian people, can give a dispensation for those sick and weak, for women that have given birth and children, for old and helpless people, for schools and canteens, for boarding houses and asylums, for army and for the rural peasantry, for those who come regularly to the divine service, or who

build and contribute to building and maintenance of churches, schools, institutions and almshouses, as well as those who help girls to get married, youngsters to learn, arts and crafts and every person who shows mercy and has a right judgement with the widow and the orphan, with the poor and the bad man"¹¹.

Also, upon the proposal of His Beatitude Father Patriarch Justinian and „taking into account the principle of accommodation of the disciplinary and moral norms to the needs of reality”, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, by its resolution on February 27, 1956, decreed the following:

„A) Children up to the age of 7 receive absolution from fasting, being able to eat during the year any type of foods;

B) For children between 7 and 12 years of age and for the faithful of any age overwhelmed with bodily weaknesses and suffering, fasting should be mandatory only in the following days: a) all Wednesdays and Fridays, except for the days when fish is allowed; b) the first and the last week of the Holy and Great Fast of Pascha and also the Fast of the Nativity; c) from June 24 to 29 (5 days from the fasting of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul); d) from August 1 to 15; e) the Nativity eve, the Epiphany eve, August 29, September 14;

C) For the other days and weeks during the big ecclesiastical fastings, children from 7 to 12 years old and the faithful of any age who are suffering should be allowed to eat fish, spawn, eggs, milk and cheese"¹².

This reality caused the topic of fasting to be debated at the inter-orthodox level and even to suggest a review of the fasts during the year and their adaptation to the new conditions of life.

The Topic of Fasting During the Panorthodox Meetings in the XXth Century

During the XXth century an ample process of dialogue was initiated between the representatives of all the Orthodox Churches, intended to provide answers to the issues of contemporary Christian life and to prepare the meeting of a Holy and Great Synod of Orthodoxy. Right from the start, among the topics approached by the representatives of the churches was also the topic of fasting, since in the local Churches had appeared different practices related to fasting, that affected the canonical unity of the Orthodox Church.

¹¹ *Două hotărâri ale Sfântului Sinod cu privire la sărbători și posturi* (Bucharest: Typography Cărților Bisericești, 1907), 28-29.

¹² Ms. dactilografiat, Arhiva Sfântului Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, year 1956 *apud* Constantin Pavel, *Posturile rânduite de Biserica Ortodoxă...*, 430; see Nicodim Sachelarie, *Pravila bisericească*, 386-387.

Right from the first panorthodox meeting - the¹³ panorthodox Congress of Constantinople¹⁴ on May 10 – June 8, 1923 – together with other stringent issues of Orthodoxy, such as the issue of calendar, the topic of fasting was also tackled.

The topic of fasting was tackled during the fifth topic, the last point (the eighth). Thus, the representatives of the Churches decided on June 5, 1923: In terms of fasting, every ecclesiastical authority can take its lead from apostolic Canon 69, that stipulates: „If a bishop, or priest, or deacon, or subdeacon, or lecturer, or musician, does not fast on Wednesday and on Friday during the Holy Fasting of 40 days before Pascha, he is to be defrocked, except for the cases when he is hindered from these due to bodily weaknesses; if he is lay, to be excommunicated”. Yet for emergency situations the “dispensation” will be respected, where the comment of Balsamon to this canon should be kept as a guide: „In terms of this canon, we must note that there is only one period of fasting that lasts for forty days, because if other such periods existed, the canon would remind us of these ones. Still we are not ashamed to fast on other fasting days, respectively before the Holy Apostles, before the Dormition of the Mother of God and before the Birth of our Lord”¹⁵.

On May 1, 1926, the Ecumenic Patriarch Basil the IIIrd (1925-1929) addressed an encyclic to all the Hierarchs of the Orthodox Churches, by which their opinion was required in relation to the perspective of organizing some preparatory conferences and of a ProSynod, made up of the representatives of all the local Churches, that should be preliminary to the future Panorthodox Synod¹⁶, and among the topics mentioned by some local Churches is also the one of fasting.

A step forward in analyzing the topic of fasting occurred on the occasion of the meeting of the preparatory Interorthodox Commission at Vatoped Monastery, during the period June 8-23, 1930. This Commission, that was called by the ecumenic Patriarch Fotie the IInd (1929-1935), had as its purpose the setting of the list of topics that were to be analyzed during a Pro-Synod, that was to be gathered in the near future, as well as the establishment of the number of representatives of the Autocephalous Churches that would participate in the Pro-Synod. All the Orthodox Churches participated in the Commission in Vatoped, except for the Churches of

¹³ For the denomination of this meeting, the Archimandrite Iuliu Scriban used the expression of „interorthodox conference” or „religious conference” in Constantinople; see Iuliu Scriban, „Conferința interortodoxă din Constantinopol”, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 9, (1922-1923): 662-663.

¹⁴ The precepts of the Panorthodox Congress in Constantinople in 1923 have been taken over from the work of Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe din 1923 până în 2009 – spre Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Annex I, (Bucharest: Basilica, 2013), 137-145.

¹⁵ According to Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe din 1923 până în 2009...*, Annex I, p. 143.

¹⁶ The Romanian Orthodox Church transmitted to the Ecumenic Patriarchy, by a letter, a list of 9 topics (among which the topic of fasting) that should be previously discussed by all the Orthodox Churches: *Examinarea din nou a posturilor, în legătură cu clima, cu igiena organismului omenesc și cu influența lor morală asupra sufletului*. Priest Gheorghe Soare, „De la Vatopedi la Rhodos”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 9-10 (1961): 845.

Russia, Bulgaria and Albania (the last two were not invited, due to the difficult relations with the Ecumenic Patriarchy). The Interorthodox Commission in Vatoped adopted a list of general topics, in 17 points, that had to be discussed at that esteemed Pro-Synod.

A very important role in the preparation, from a theological point of view, of the topics that were to be discussed at the future Ecumenic Synod, was undertaken at the first Congress of the Faculties of Orthodox Theology, held in Athens, between November 29 – December 6, 1936, that tackled two big topics: *The place of the science of theology in the Orthodox Church* and *Theological contributions on some ecclesiological principles*. Within each topic, more sub-topics were tackled, the issue of fasting being tackled in the second topic¹⁷.

The first Congress of the Faculties of Orthodox Theology provided a very important theological basis for the continuation of debates in relation to the idea of calling an Ecumenic Synod, as well as the one by which the Orthodox Church could solve some urgent matters, that could not be put off until convening such a Synod. Although this Congress *did not have the authority to make decisions on behalf of the Orthodox Church, it contributed decisively to the theological awareness of the issues with which the Orthodox Churches were grappling during that time*¹⁸.

If in 1948, at the Orthodox Conference in Moscow, the topic of fasting was not debated by the representatives of the Orthodox Churches¹⁹, this topic was tackled again at the first Panorthodox Conference held on the island of Rhodos, between September 24 – October 1, 1961.

The Panorthodox Conference on Rhodos adopted a catalogue of synthesized topics organized in 8 groups, each topic having in its turn, more sub-topics. At group 3, point 5 reference is made to fasting: *The rematching of provisions related to the ecclesiastical fasts to the needs of the contemporary era*.²⁰

The first Panorthodox Conference stood for a great success for the cooperation between the Orthodox Churches, especially due to the fact that their representatives succeeded in understanding very well²¹ and, in particular, in finding

¹⁷ Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe din 1923 până în 2009*, 38.

¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

¹⁹ The following four topics have been tackled at this Conference: the Vatican and the Orthodox Church, the Validity of Anglican ordinations, the Ecclesiastic Calendar and Orthodoxy and the Ecumenic Movement; see † Nicolae, Bishop of Vadului, Feleacului and Clujului, "Conferința de la Moscova", *Ortodoxia*, no. 1 (1949): 19-27.

²⁰ Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe...*, Annex IV, 162-163.

²¹ Testimonials we find to this end from the articles: Liviu Stan, "Soborul panortodox de la Rhodos", *Mitropolia Olteniei*, no. 10-12 (1961): 732-733; Nicolae Chițescu, "Note și impresii de la Conferința Panortodoxă de la Rhodos", *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 9-10 (1961): 887; Gr. M., "Expunerea Prea Sfințitului Episcop Dr. Nicolae Corneanu al Aradului despre Conferința de la Rhodos", *Mitropolia Ardealului*, no. 11-12 (1961): 841.

solutions to the difficulties that they faced, even if that catalogue of topics proved to be too complex and inappropriate for a further Pro-Synod.

The fact that the topic of fasting was also tackled during the fourth Panorthodox Conference in 1968 shows that this topic represented a constant preoccupation of the representatives of the Orthodox Churches during the interorthodox meetings. The fourth Conference was called in order to simplify the vast theme that was set in 1961. To this end, the Greek professor Panayotis Trembelas showcased that “in former times, each synod was in charge with only one topic, nowadays there are dozens. We don’t have enough theologians and the tasks seem to exceed the human powers; even if we were just like Origen, we couldn’t solve them”²².

The works of the fourth Panorthodox Conference were held between June 8-16, 1968 at the Orthodox Center in Chambésy near Geneva, Switzerland. All the Orthodox Churches participated, except for those from Georgia, Albania and Czechoslovakia.²³

During the Conference it was decided to give up on the plan of a Pro-Synod, and instead to organize a series of Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conferences, that were to adopt the texts related to the topics suggested starting with 1961, texts that were to be presented directly to the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. The choice of some topics adopted on Rhodos in 1961 was also decided and their distribution for study to the local Churches, as follows:

1. The origins of divine revelation (the Ecumenic Patriarchy);
2. The participation of laymen in the life of the Church (the Bulgarian Church);
3. The rematching of ecclesiastical precepts related to fasting (the Yugoslav Church);
4. Obstacles in marriage (the Russian Church and the Greek Church);
5. The topic of calendar and of celebration in common of the Holy Pascha (the Russian Church and the Greek Church);
6. The ecclesiastical dispensation (the Romanian Orthodox Church).²⁴

These topics were to be drawn up by the respective Churches in six months, and then they had to be handed in to the Secretariat for the preparation of the Holy and Great Synod. Once received, the Secretariat drew up syntheses of the answers received, that were published in Greek, Russian, French, English, Italian and German.²⁵

²² Anne Jansen, *Die Zukunft der Orthodoxie. Konzilspläne und Kirchenstrukturen* (Benziger Verlag, 1986), 33 *apud* Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe...*, 75.

²³ Liviu Stan, “A patra Conferință Panortodoxă”, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 7-8 (1968): 870-871.

²⁴ Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe...*, 77, 181-182.

²⁵ This stands for the largest publication of some texts delivered in the preparation process of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church.

Therefore, during 1971-1976, more Orthodox Churches studied the matter of reducing the catalogue of topics in 1961, some of the churches making concrete proposals for new topics or of shorter lists of topics.²⁶

Indeed, the first of the four points on the agenda of the first Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference, held in Chambésy between November 21-28, 1976, was the review of the list of topics for the Holy and Great Synod. The Committee suggested ten topics, in order, to be put on the agenda of the Holy and Great Synod.²⁷

These ten topics, that have a theological aspect (but not a dogmatic character) and that include “the most important issues for which are necessary panorthodox decisions of authority” have been divided in more groups²⁸.

The topic of fasting was taken up during the second Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference, that was held between September 3-12, 1982, at the Orthodox Center in Chambésy, bearing the title: *the Adaptation of the ecclesiastical order related to fasting, according to the requirements of the current era*, being the third item on the agenda.²⁹

The four working commissions presented to the plenary assembly the prepared projects, and the assembly adopted precepts for all the four topics on the agenda. Still, while for the first and last topic (the obstacles for marriage and the topic of calendar) final precepts have been adopted, that were to be presented to the Holy and Great Orthodox Synod, the texts related to the topic of the fasting and of ordaining the bishops had only a temporary character, to be discussed during the following Pre-Synodal panorthodox conference: taking into account the “diversity of opinions on the topic of fasting and wishing to avoid a quick decision in this regard, the second Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference, in order to provide the Churches with the possibility of a better knowledge of the needs of the large masses of faithful, decided that this topic was to be reconsidered at a future Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference”³⁰. We state that at this meeting, the

²⁶ The difficulty faced in setting the topics that had to be approached by the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, caused the bishop Antonie Ploieșteanul to speak about “a long adventure of topics”, in †Antonie Ploieșteanul, “O privire asupra pregătirii Sfântului și Marelui Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe”, *Ortodoxia*, no. 2 (1977), 248.

²⁷ 1. Orthodox Diaspora; 2. Autocephaly and how it should be proclaimed; 3. Autonomy and how it should be proclaimed; 4. The Parchements (which is the order of Churches in the liturgical memorial); 5. The issue of the new calendar; 6. Obstacles in marriage; 7. The rematching of the ecclesiastical precepts related to fasting; 8. The relations of the Orthodox Churches with the rest of the Christian world; 9. Orthodoxy and the Ecumenic Movement; 10. The contribution of the local Orthodox churches in setting the Christian ideals of peace, freedom, brotherhood and love between nations and the removal of racial discrimination.

²⁸ Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe...*, 96.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁰ Dan-Ilie Ciobotea, “Spre Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Ortodoxiei”, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 11-12 (1982): 943; Nicolae Necula, “Învățătura despre post în Biserica Ortodoxă”, *Studii Teologice*, no. 7-8 (1984), 517-518.

Romanian Orthodox Church supported to keep unchanged the prescriptions related to fasting³¹.

Furthermore, in terms of the topic *The adaptation of the ecclesiastical orders related to fasting, according to the requirements of the current era*, the second Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference decided the following:

- deliberating on this topic with all attention and care;
- considering, still, that the preparation made up to the present as being insufficient and not allowing Orthodoxy to express unanimously on this point;
- in order to avoid a fast resolution and in order to provide the autocephalous Orthodox Churches the opportunity of preparation compared to the continuation of the tradition of the people of God, the IInd Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference:

1. Invited the local Orthodox Churches to send to the Secretariat, for the preparation of the Holy and Great Synod, their observations on this topic, based on the file already prepared;

2. Put off the issue in order to be reconsidered at a further Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference, following the previous study by the preparatory interorthodox Commission;

3. Pronounced that the old practice remain in force until the Holy and Great Synod shall examine the issue based on the proposals of a Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference in charge of study³².

All the Orthodox Churches except for that in Albania³³ participated at the third Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference, held between October 28 – November 6, 1986, at the Orthodox Center in Chambésy,.

As regards fasting, we note that the Metropolitan Antonie of Ardeal, as leader of the Romanian delegation, suggested that the title of this topic not speak about “the rematching of the rules of Fasting”, since this would “scandalize our faithful, and it could be considered that we are changing the canonic rules in terms of Fasting”, but to speak about the importance of Fasting “and about its practice nowadays³⁴. Following preliminary discussions on the four topics, four working commissions were settled, one for each topic, in charge with drawing up

³¹ Teodor Damșa, “Tradiție și ‘readaptare’ în aplicarea prescripțiilor bisericești cu privire la post”, *Mitropolia Banatului*, no. 1 (1987): 27.

³² Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe...*, 199-200.

³³ The delegation of the Romanian Orthodox Church was made up of the metropolitan Antonie al Ardealului, the metropolitan Nicolae al Banatului, the patriarchal vicar bishop Nifon Ploieșteanul, priest Ph.D. Ion Bria, and as advisors, priest professor Ștefan Alexe and priest professor Dumitru Popescu.

³⁴ † Antonie Plămădeală, “A treia Conferință Panortodoxă Preconciliară”, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 9-10 (1986), 40.

the final texts, in order to be adopted during the conference. The representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church who were part of the commission that analyzed the importance of fasting was patriarchal vicar bishop Nifon Ploieșteanul and priest professor Dumitru Popescu, as advisor. Following the preparation of the four texts related to each topic put on the agenda, the members of the Conference adopted them unanimously, following their being presented to the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. We state that the text, according to the recommendation of Antonie Metropolitan, was not adopted with the title *Rematching of ecclesiastic provisions related to fasting*, but with the title *The Importance of fasting and its keeping nowadays*³⁵.

Subsequently, the document that was drawn up and completed at the third Panorthodox Pre-Synodal Conference, in 1986, from the Orthodox Center in Chambésy, was approved by the representatives of Autocephalous Orthodox Churches (January 21-28, 2016), being stated on the agenda of the Holy and Great Synod.

The Settlement of Canonic Tradition in the Document *The Importance of Fasting and its Observance Nowadays*

This resolution represents, currently, the result of all the efforts and debates related to the issue of fasting of the Orthodox Churches representatives, during the panorthodox meetings in the XXth century.

The document did not suffer major changes compared to the one approved in 1986, during the third Pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference, as Tihon archimandrite, the abbot of Stavronichita Monastery³⁶, present during the works of this Synod, was saying contrary to the affirmations of some people that fasting would have been abolished.

Right from the beginning we remind our readers that His Beatitude Father Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, during the discussions, showcased the fact that *rediscovery in today's world of the value of bodily and spiritual fasting, accompanied by prayer, highlight the balanced character of the text*.³⁷

However, Tihon Archimandrite, in the *Epistle of Stavronichita Monastery to the Holy Chinotită of the Holy Mountain about the Holy and Great Synod*, showed that during the discussions „two bishops mainly, one from the Church of Greece and one from the Church of Cyprus, that, expressing their own opinions, *supported with warmth and rhetorical skill the release of the world from exaggerated fasting and*

³⁵ Translation by Ștefan Alexe in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 9-10 (1986): 70-73.

³⁶ <https://doxologia.ro/documentar/epistola-intaistatatorului-manastirii-stavronichita-catre-sfanta-chinotita-sfantului>, accessed on May 9, 2017.

³⁷ See the “Precept of the Holy Synod”, no. 10.112 (November 2016).

*the agreement on some optional and assumed fasting, making efforts, hoping that due to unawareness and kindness, to attract the Holy Synod toward the theological impurity of compromise and adaptation of the Church to the world and not of promotion and guidance of the world by the Church toward the evangelic thoroughness in agreement with the characteristic teaching of our Holy Tradition on this. Finally, upon the cry of many bishops to keep the status quo, no other intervention has been made to the text*³⁸, keeping the canonical and patristic tradition in terms of fasting.

Taking into account the importance of this document³⁹, I shall present the main ideas stipulated in the 9 points, following to underline the need to implement them.

We are being told, in the first article, about fasting and the fact that this is set up by God right from the beginning of the world: “1. *Fasting is a divine commandment* (Gen 2:16-17). According to Basil the Great, fasting “*is as old as humanity itself, because it was prescribed in paradise*” (On Fasting. 1, 3. PG 31, 168 A). Fasting is a great spiritual endeavour and the foremost expression of the Orthodox ascetic ideal. *The Orthodox Church, in strict compliance with the apostolic precepts, synodal canons and the patristic tradition as a whole, has always proclaimed the great significance of fasting for our spiritual life and salvation. During the entire liturgical year, the Church promotes the tradition and the patristic teaching on fasting, on constant and unceasing watchfulness of man and his devotion to spiritual endeavour*”. In the final part of the first point we can see the connection between fasting and the liturgical iconography during the period of Triodion that shows us the fact that fasting is “*an imitation of the angelic life, the “mother” of all good things and virtues*”.

In the first part of the second point biblical reasoning is presented, invoking a large number of quotes, that are related to a large extent to the person of Christ the Messiah and by the personal example of the Lord (Luke 4, 1-2). Fasting is generally prescribed as “a means of abstinence, of penitence and of spiritual edification”. Since the apostolic times, the Church has proclaimed the profound importance of fasting and established Wednesday and Friday as days of fasting, in addition to the fast before Pascha, as cited in the Church History of Eusebius of Caesarea (Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, in Eusebius, Church History 5, 24, PG 20, 497 B-508 AB). In ecclesiastical practice that has existed for centuries, there has always been diversity with regard to the length of the fasting, having as grounds liturgical and monastic factors. These new periods of fasting, appeared following “an adequate preparation before the big holidays”. The connection

³⁸ <https://doxologia.ro/documentar/epistola-intaistatatorului-manastirii-stavronichita-catre-sfanta-chinotita-sfantului> in May 9, 2017.

³⁹ The text of the document was taken from www.basilica.ro (accessed on April 24, 2017).

between fasting and cult highlights its spiritual character, which involves the fact that “all the faithful are invited to respond accordingly, each to the best of his or her strength and ability, while not allowing such liberty to diminish this holy institution”.

Point III highlights the ways in which the Christians must fast, stipulating that “real fasting is related to unceasing prayer and genuine penitence”, to which we should also add good deeds, since fasting means nothing without them. Consequently fasting is not a simple formal abstinence from certain food, but “*Real fasting means alienation from evil, evil-speaking, abstinence from anger, alienation from lust, gossip, lies, and false oaths. The lack of all of them means a good fast*” (Saint Basil the Great, *On Fasting*, 2, 7, PG 31, 196 D). Moderation is another important variable discussed in this article, and this is not related only to the type of food, but also to the quantity consumed of these foods. *Abstinence during fasting from certain meals, as well as moderation – not only related to the type, but also to the quantity of foods – stand for visible elements of the spiritual struggle*, that is fasting. Therefore, the true fast affects the entire life in “Christ of the faithful and is crowned by their participation in divine worship and, in particular in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist”.

Point IV shows that Orthodoxy is a Christocentric religion and for this reason the fasting of forty days for the Lord becomes a model to follow for Christians. Fasting helps us “*to recover by its observance that which we have lost by not observing it*” (Gregory the Theologian, *Homily 45 On Holy Pascha*, 28, PG 36, 661 A), following Christ in his trip towards death and resurrection in Him, “As, in Adam all die, the same in Christ all will resurrect” (1 Corinthians 15,22). We can see from the argumentation presented the *spiritual character of fasting, in particular of the Great Fasting, as well as the fact that fasting has a Christocentric understanding in the entire patristic tradition*.

Point V speaks about spiritual perfection, showing that: *Ascesis and spiritual struggle are endless in this life, like the refinement of the perfect. Everyone is called to strive, to the best of his or her abilities, to reach the lofty Orthodox standard, which is the goal of deification by grace*. Indeed, while they should do all things that they were commanded, they should nonetheless never vaunt themselves, but confess that “*they are unprofitable servants and have only done that which was their duty to do*” (Luke 17, 10). According to the Orthodox understanding of the spiritual life, *all people are obligated to maintain the good struggle of the fasting, however, in a spirit of self-reproach and humble recognition of their condition, they must rely upon God’s mercy for their shortcomings, inasmuch as the Orthodox spiritual life is unattainable without the spiritual struggle of the fasting*.

Point VI reminds us of the fact that: *Like a nurturing mother, the Orthodox Church has defined what is beneficial for people’s salvation and established the holy periods of fasting “as God-given protection” in the believers’*

new life in Christ against every snare of the enemy. Following the example of the Holy Fathers, the Church preserves today, as she did in the past, the holy apostolic precepts, synodal canons, and sacred traditions, always advancing the holy fasts as the perfect ascetic path for the faithful leading to spiritual perfection and salvation.

We can see in the document what are the fasts set by the Church proclaiming the *necessity to observe all the fasts throughout the year*, namely: the Fasting of Pascha, Wednesdays and Fridays, testified in the sacred canons, as well as the fasts of the Nativity, the Holy Apostles, the Dormition of the Mother of God, the single-day fasting on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, on the eve of the Epiphany and on the day commemorating the Beheading of John the Baptist, in addition to the fasts established for pastoral reasons or observed at the desire of the faithful.

In point VII the participant hierarchs at the Holy Great Synod, established, with pastoral discernment in terms of dispensation, showing that: *The Church put limits to the fasting regime, the people loving dispensations. As a consequence, the Church has considered spiritual dispensation in case of physical sickness, of extreme necessity or difficult times, through the responsible discernment and pastoral care of the body of bishops in the local Churches.*

We can see in this context that *the responsibility of the application of dispensation was confided to the Synod of the bishops in the autocephalous Churches, but also to the bishops*, setting the rules of its application, respectively regarding *bodily sickness, extreme necessity or in case of hard times.*

Point VIII regulates the issue of application of dispensation, without diminishing the value of fasting, showing that *it is a reality that today, be it due to carelessness, be it due to the conditions of life, whichever is the case, many faithful today do not observe all the prescriptions of fasting. However, all these instances where the sacred prescriptions of fasting are loosened, either in general or in particular instances, should be treated by the Church with pastoral care, "for God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33, 11), without, however, ignoring the value of the fast. Therefore, with regard to those who find it difficult to observe the prevailing guidelines for fasting, whether for personal reasons (illness, military service, conditions of work, etc.) or general reasons (particular existing conditions in certain regions with regard to climate, as well as socioeconomic circumstances, i.e., inability to find lenten foods), it is left to the discretion of the local Orthodox Churches to determine how to exercise philanthropic oikonomia and empathy, relieving in these special cases the "burden" of the holy fasting.*

The Church should extend her philanthropic dispensation with prudence, undoubtedly to a greater extent when it comes to those fasts, on which the ecclesiastical tradition and practice have not always been uniform "(...) *It is good to*

fast every day, but may the one who fasts not blame the one who does not fast. In such matters you must neither legislate, nor use force, nor compel the flock entrusted to you; instead, you must use persuasion, gentleness and a word seasoned with salt” (John of Damascus, On the Holy Fasts, 3, PG 95, 68 B).

Point IX brings to the discussion table the topic of fasting prior to Holy Communion, setting the *obligation of fasting for three or more days before Holy Communion to be left to the discretion of the piety of the faithful, according to the words of Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite: “Fasting before partaking of Communion is not decreed by the divine Canons. Nevertheless, those who are able to fast even a whole week before it, are doing the right thing” (Commentary of the 13th canon of Sixth Ecumenical Council, Pedalion, 191).*

Midnight is recommended in this document as a starting point for fasting, underlining the fact that: *all the Church’s faithful must observe the holy fasts and abstain from food from midnight for frequent participation in Holy Communion, which is the most profound expression of the essence of the Church.*

Another important issue tackled in this document is related to *fasting before receiving the sacraments, for special occasions, during the periods of penitence* or in other circumstances: *The faithful should become accustomed to fasting as an expression of repentance, as the fulfilment of a spiritual pledge, to achieve a particular spiritual end, in times of temptation, in conjunction with supplications to God, for adults approaching the sacrament of baptism, prior to ordination, in cases where penance is imposed, as well as during pilgrimages and other similar instances.*

The general conclusion was that Church must affirm keeping the fasting with preciseness, the application of dispensation being left up to every Autocephalous Church or of every bishop, based on a pastoral and missionary analysis.

We can see very clearly from the document approved by the Holy and Great Synod that the teaching of the Orthodox Church related to the “holy institution” of fasting, its origin and importance for the spiritual life of the faithful, the way in which dispensation must be applied in case the faithful are faced with different situations that make impossible the compliance of the fasting periods due to objective reasons⁴⁰. For that purpose, Saint Basil the Great recommends moderation and abstinence as means in the therapy of spiritual diseases⁴¹.

As already mentioned in this chapter, over the course of the past century, together with other stringent topics of Orthodoxy, the fasting topic was constantly in the focus of attention of the hierarchy and of the orthodox faithful. This preoccupation can be explained only by the importance that fasting has

⁴⁰ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Scrieri*, part II, *Asceticele, Regulile mari* (Bucharest: E.I.B.M.B.O.R., 1989), 252.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 247-248.

in the faithful's life, as a means of increasing in virtue, of personal perfection and of acquiring the celestial Kingdom. To the extent in which this resolution of the Holy and Great Synod will be picked up by all the local Churches, it will have a normative character for all the faithful. However, taking into account the precise conditions, each local Church can set the limits and conditions of fasting for its own faithful.

In order to regulate fasting nowadays in the canonical doctrine we must take into account the role and meaning of Church in the social and spiritual life, that has to relate to the eschatological finality of this one. "The Church, as one of the Romanian theologians over the past century stated, is the completion of salvation by the Incarnation of Christ, is the unification of everything there is, or is destined to include everything there is. The Church is Christ extended with His Body deified in humanity"⁴².

Taking into account the fact of this finality of the Church we must state that in order to meet these goals, principles have been set from the very first days of its existence that should keep the unity and harmony of the spiritual life between its members and between the different communities in symphonic harmony with canonical doctrine but also customs by law, parts of the ecclesiastic tradition, all having their source in the doctrine of the Orthodox Church.⁴³

Starting from this reality, we consider that the Church can administer the necessary remedies and therapies according to the diseases that society faces. In the light of the afore-mentioned we consider necessary the application with exactness of fasting in the life of the faithful familiar more and more with dispensation on the part of the priests. This formalization has negative effects, on the one hand for the spiritual life of the faithful, on the other hand, leads to excessive absolutions and to breaches of canonical doctrine.

Medical science of today has noted that fasting, far from being against the nature of man, on the contrary, is always useful, being in some cases even recommended as a means of healing, for the recovery of the body tired and intoxicated by too much food. It goes without saying that when it is practised due to a need or to purely hygienic and sanitary reasons, fasting is deprived of the religious value that it has when it is practiced willingly and simply for spiritual reasons, as an act of virtue and cult prescribed and regulated by the Church.

Furthermore, we must admit nowadays that given the circumstances of life and activity in the big urban agglomerations, the observance of fasting has become very difficult. Under the influence of city people, villagers, in particular youngsters, no longer observe the church fasts, that the older members still continue

⁴² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II, (Bucharest: E.I.B.M.B.O.R., 1997), 129, 137, 138.

⁴³ Ioan N. Floca, *Drept canonic ortodox...*, vol. I, 56.

to keep. The confessors, noticing this sad reality, have been forced to become more indulgent, the majority conditioning only a few days of fasting to receiving the Eucharist. They apply the ecclesiastic principle of administration, for the purpose of keeping the faithful close to the Church.

Still, fasting must be considered also from the spiritual point of view. If stopping or the abstention from certain foods can be justified in order to strengthen the body, as is stipulated by the 69th apostolic canon, and also this document of the Holy and Great Synod in Crete, we should keep in sight the purpose of fasting, that of curbing the body for a better spiritual growth. For that purpose, we consider that the confessors must be cautious to the effects of this type of fasting in spiritual life. We must emphasize the importance of completing spiritual fasting.

Therefore, real love is recommended, keeping the conscience according to canonical doctrine and to church tradition in the patristic era. The confessor must take into account the recommendations of 102 Trullan canon when he makes a decision in terms of severity of fasting recommended to every faithful. The non-compliance of canonical doctrine, the abuses of some priests and the hypocrisy of some faithful stand at the basis of the lack of order in terms of practicing fasting in our society. The faithful must comply with canonical and church dispositions without adapting the dispositions to their personal needs, as has been noticed by contemporary liturgists as being practised nowadays.⁴⁴

Considered from the perspective of its spiritual aspects and understood as a complex of bodily and spiritual actions, fasting appears to us as a possibility of deliverance, of internal fulfilment, of finding a balance between our soul and body, of blessing. The nutritional habit of fasting is only a means, and the purpose of fasting is reaching a state of spiritual ascension. Now, these are after all the purposes that the man in western society is looking for, a society completely laicized. The post-modern and laicized man, as the western man defines himself nowadays, "is overwhelmed and totally bewildered by the aggressive and unhealthy offers of the society he lives in, so that he must choose, distinguish, and find his own way spiritually, and due to a lack of support, reaches out to consult nutritionists or psychologists"⁴⁵.

By applying these canonical provisions we are keeping the canonical conscience, the same down through the centuries. This determines, by its unity, that the different forms of church life not be considered as separate moments in history, but as part of an uninterrupted process that unifies the first step of church organization with the foundation of our ecclesial regime⁴⁶. Thus, looking into the

⁴⁴ Nicolae D. Necula, *Tradiție și înnoire în slujirea liturgică*, vol. I (Galați: Publishing House Dunării de Jos, 1996), 103.

⁴⁵ Viorel Ioniță, "Aspecte ale postului în lumea occidentală secularizată", *Ziarul Lumina* (March 29, 2014).

⁴⁶ Nicolai N. Afanasiev, *op. cit.*, 31-32.

future through the eyes of the past we can see the importance of applying the canonical doctrine and of keeping the canonical conscience, that steadies church life by a continuous update of primary church doctrine in day-to-day life.

Conclusions

The fasting topic generated numerous discussions down the centuries, thus the Holy Priests tried to respond to these needs and set rules that were to be followed in different situations in order to settle the disputes and conflicts created around an issue with implications for the cultic and individual life.

In general, they tried to state, as we have seen, the types of fasting, the need for fasting for those who want to impart in the Body and Blood of Christ, for those about to receive the Ordination sacrament, etc. They also tried to demonstrate the importance of fasting on Wednesday and Friday and its compulsoriness for all Christians. They set rules for each of the fasts during the year (the Nativity fasting, the Pascha fasting, the fasting of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, the fasting of the Dormition of the Mother of God). Most of the canonical provisions refer to Pascha fasting.

Fasting always stood as a permanent preoccupation of the Church during the XXth century, in particular in the second half of the century. Through the document prepared in Chambesy in 1986, the canonical tradition has been affirmed, without bringing modifications to the ecclesial life, respectively to the canonical standards. Moreover, the spiritual implications of fasting are also showcased, as well as the the Cristocentric character of fasting.

Taking these reasons into account in the light of canonical doctrine and of patristic tradition, we must keep the fasting order without being lured away by the excessive application of church administration that leads to dissolute fasting, nor by blind attention to detail that can result in unexpected reactions towards helpless faithful, children and the sick.

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