



ARTICLE BY

MORAN MOR IGNATIUS ZAKKA-I IWAS

THE PATRIARCH OF THE APOSTOLIC SEE OF ANTIOCH & ALL THE EAST
THE SUPREME HEAD OF THE UNIVERSAL SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Fasting: A Definition

Fasting is a voluntary act of abandoning worldly life. It is a sign of man's obedience to, and respect of God's laws and his observance of God's ordinances. Fasting is observed in two ways: by voluntary abstinence from food or drink for a specific period of time and by eating light, small and fat free meals, consisting of cereals, beans, fruits and vegetable oils. A person who fasts refrains from eating meat and animal products except for fish and all seafood and honey because bees are insects without fleshly desires.

Grades

The learned Bar 'Ebroyo (+1286) states:

"Fasting has three degrees: general, special and exclusive." One may practise general fasting by either refraining completely from eating or drinking during daytime, in the evening eating cereals and beans, or by refraining from eating meat and animal products during the day. This type of fasting has its own laws and regulations for so many people might refrain from eating without the intention of practising fasting. As such, they would not be considered as fasting. Special fasting is that type practised by recluses. Exclusive fasting is that practised by the perfect, who couple their abstinence from food and the indulgence of senses with purification of soul and refraining from evil thoughts. The only condition requested for such a type of fasting is the eradication of every mundane thought which might exist deep down in one's heart. Although this grade of fasting is very difficult to attain, yet it can be achieved so easily through training as the saying goes:

"With the least granted, we might be content. We are the masters of our desires."

Objectives

The main objectives of fasting are the weakening of the lust of the flesh, training the will to control whims and giving the spirit the precious opportunity to transcend mundane desires and be elevated above worldly desires into heavenly thoughts for attaining purification, and being cleansed and becoming able to express the spirit's love of God, Almighty manifesting thus its preference of spiritual life to physical one, making the spirit triumphant over the flesh.

The Apostle Paul says in this context:

"This I say then, walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." (Gal. 5:16-17). He also states: "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live." (Rom. 8:13). The psalmist says: "I humbled my soul with fasting." (Ps. 35:13). Humbling the soul is the mourning mentioned by the Lord when, defining fasting to the disciples of John. He says: "Can the children of the bride chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them?" (Matt. 9:15). Humbleness and mourning are one and the

same thing, being the evident sign of true repentance, the ultimate goal of fasting. They form one of the conditions of true fasting deemed acceptable to God.

It is not only the body which fasts by abstaining from food or drink but the soul as well by keeping away from sin. Both flesh and soul avoid the motives leading to it. This can be deduced from the Lord's command in the mouth of Prophet Joel who says: "Turn ye even to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for He is gracious and merciful." (Joel 2:12).

Exemption from Fasting

Fasting is imposed on the faithful who are adults and healthy. The elderly, children, babies, sick people, nursing, postpartum and pregnant women are exempted for necessity.

Fasting in the Old Testament

God Almighty, imposed fasting on the first man when He commanded him in the Garden of Eden saying "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen. 16:17).

Adam's failure to keep God's command and obey Him by abstaining from eating from the forbidden fruit resulted in his expulsion from the Garden of Eden and in being sent to the land of suffering and torment. Needless to say that the food of the first man was free of meat and limited to cereals, beans and fruits in the Garden of Eden. This is supported by God's address to Adam and Eve: "Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed, to you it shall be for your meal." (Gen. 1:29). It was only after the flood that God permitted man, represented by Noah, to eat meat. (Gen. 9:3).

The Patriarchs, the Prophets, the righteous and the pious of the Old Testament observed fasting with the aim of gaining God's favor through faith and good deeds. According to the Bible and prior to the giving of God's Commandments, Moses ate neither bread nor drank water for forty days. (Ex. 34:28). It is also reported that Prophet Elijah, in fulfillment of God's command, "did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meal forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God." (I Kings 19:8). The Prophet Daniel abstained from eating meat and drinking wine, saying: "I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth." (Dan.10:2-3). Based on the story of Daniel and his friends, we know that they ate just vegetables and refused to defile themselves with the portion of the king's meat (Dan. 1:8-17) and as such set a model for those who eat only seeds, beans and fruits while fasting. God commanded the Prophet Ezekiel:

"Take thou also unto thee wheat, and barley, and beans, and lentils, and millet, and fitches, and put them in one vessel, and make thee bread thereof, according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon thy side, three hundred and ninety days shalt thou eat thereof. And thy meat which thou shalt eat shall be by weight, thou shall drink also water by measure." (Ezek 4:9).

Fasting for Repentance

When the Prophet Jonah warned the people of Nineveh according to the word of the Lord, he stated: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto

God: yea, let them turn everyone from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. (Jn. 3:1-10).

Canonical Fasts

The people of Israel observed fasting throughout their generations especially with the aim of repentance and turning back to God. God enjoined fasts on them on various occasions through His Prophets and Saints. The book of Leviticus records the Lord saying: "And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you: For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the Lord" (Lev. 16:29-30). And in the Book of Prophet Zechariah the Lord says: "The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace." (Zech. 8:19).

True Fasting Coupled with Mercy

The concept of true fasting accepted by God in the Old Testament can be illustrated by God through Prophet Isaiah's words: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen to loosen the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isa. 58:6-7).

Fasting Twice a Week

The Lord Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican illustrates that a good Jew fasts on Monday and Thursday every week (Lk. 18:10-14).

Patriarchs Enjoin Fasts

At times of crises leaders of the people of the Old Testament enjoined fasts on their people as did Ezra who said: "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance... So we fasted and besought our God for this, and he was entreated of us." (Ezra 8:21-23). The Holy Book also reports that a seven-day fast was enjoined on the children of Israel as a sign of mourning for the death of King Saul and his sons (I Sam. 31:13).

Special Fasts

David the Prophet fasted and afflicted himself before God in hope that his son might be cured (II Sam. 2:21). Just like David, special fasts were voluntarily enjoined now and then by individuals and groups on themselves in seeking God's mercy on them and for delivering them from temptations.

Fasting in Christianity

In the New Testament, it was the Lord Jesus Who set the law of fasting in Christianity when He fasted forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4:2). "He did eat nothing, and when they were ended, he afterward hungered." (Lk. 4:2). The Lord Jesus was not in need of fasting but fasted to set us an example. He imposed fasting on us to show us its powerful spiritual impact especially when coupled with prayer. Fasting coupled with prayer will, therefore, be an effective spiritual weapon that will destroy Satan and his troops, our spiritual enemies. The Lord revealed this to us when He said: "How be it this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." (Matt. 17-21).

The Lord said in answer to the question of John's disciples, who wondered why His disciples did not fast, "Can the children of the bride chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them and then shall they fast in those days." (Matt. 9:14-15; Luke 5:35). The Lord's words were deemed as an authorization. He vested his disciples to set dates for fasting. Accordingly, the Holy Apostles and the righteous disciples started fasting after the Lord's Ascension to heaven. They fasted on diverse occasions and in different ways. In the Acts of the Apostles we read the following about them: "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.' And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." (Acts 13:2-3). The Apostle Paul prides himself on keeping the practice of fasting by saying: "But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in labors, in watchings, in fastings." (II Cor. 6:4-5).

The Lord Jesus, glory be to Him, Who authorized His Holy Apostles to practise fasting when the heavenly bridegroom would be taken away, that is after His ascension to heaven, did also authorize them, by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit, to consecrate Sunday instead of the Jewish Saturday and to elect bishops, priests and deacons. He also authorized them to establish the rites of their ordination, that is their consecration by laying hands on them.

In addition, His Holy Spirit He poured out His Holy Spirit on them at Pentecost, inspired them to arrange the rites and do the service of His Holy Sacraments that are necessary for the economy of His Church. The Lord had illustrated the best way practised in the fasting approved by God. He warned His disciples, saying: "When ye fast, be not as the hypocrites of a sad countenance for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast but unto thy Father which is in secret and thy Father Who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." (Matt. 6:16-18). "When ye fast" is a reference of the Lord to fasting prescribed under the law. The Lord does not mean by that, that one has the full freedom to adhere to the practice of fasting or to refuse it. His words "When thou prayest" (Matt. 6:5) would otherwise have meant that one is free to be committed to praying or not and that there should be no places for worship, no congregational prayer, no call for prayer or specific hours for praying.

Christ instituted the principle of fasting and praying and vested the Church with authority to regulate dates and times convenient for the believers to practise them. Special fasts are those enjoined by man on himself as for strengthening his piety in exactly the same way he says his individual private prayer for himself. In his Epistle to the Colossians, Apostle Paul said: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind." (Col. 2:16-18).

The Apostle Paul does warn the believers against the shadows of Jews and against a group of converts to Christianity who were still adherent to Jewish principles and who did not recognize the decision of the First Jerusalem Council held in AD 51, which declared that the believers need not be committed to circumcision or any other Jewish principles. He focused on "abstaining from pollutions of idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood." (Acts 15:20).

The Apostle Paul, while commending married couples to keep spousal rights, stated that the married couples should not copulate during fasting days, saying: “Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer, and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.” (I Cor. 7:5).

Some people object to practising fasting, arguing that fasting is against the Lord’s will Who says: “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” (Matt. 15:11). It is quite clear that the Lord does not mean to say that we should not fast, for He is the one Who set us the example of true fasting which is approved by God. In fact, He aimed at refuting the objections of the Pharisees when they beheld the Lord’s disciples eating without washing their hands according to the Pharisees ritual rinsing which they considered as compulsory for cleansing a man before eating. No matter how clean one’s hands might be, one shall have to practise these formality rites in order to be cleansed. They also had their own special way of washing food, which would be considered defiled if this ritualistic way of washing was not applied. The Lord Jesus refuted their empty views and showed them the importance of purity of heart, saying: “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man, but that which comes out of the mouth that defileth a man (Matt. 15:11). This means that it is the sinful thoughts and filthy words which come out of the heart of a sinful man that defile man.

Fasting, therefore, is a divine prescription and a heavenly providence practised by the Lord Jesus Himself, Who taught us to adhere to it. He vested His Holy Apostles with authority to set dates for it and illustrate ways of practising it, through which the believers can best express their faith in God, their adherence to his offices and their preference of soul to the body and angelic life to materialistic life of the world.

Order of Fasts in the New Testament

The Lord Jesus instituted the law of Fasting which was handed over to the Apostles as a spiritual principle. Setting occasions of fasting, duration and the way of practising it, were all entrusted to the Church to be in charge of. This was based on the spiritual authority the Lord has given to the Church when He addressed His Holy Apostles saying: “He that heareth you heareth Me, and He that despiseth you despiseth Me, and he that despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me.” (Luke 10:16); and when He said: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church: but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, whatsoever, ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 18:15-18).

The Lord, His name may be glorified, said to St. Peter, the chief of the Apostles: “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:19). By virtue of this spiritual authority vested in the Church by the Lord, general canonical fasts were arranged which people and clergy were obliged to observe. They were held sinful if they refused to abide by them since listening to the commands of the Church meant obeying God. Rebellion against the Church’s commands is deemed a rebellion against the Lord.

Ever since the dawn of Christianity, both clergy and laity practised fasting, abstaining from food or drink for a period of time set by the Church. It also has meant abstinence from eating meat and animal products during fasting. All Apostolic Churches throughout the world have agreed to sanctify the principles of fasting and have always considered it a divine requirement and a holy duty.

Easter Fast

The first fast instituted by the Church was the Easter fast, also called the Passion Fast. During this period, the believers abstain from eating and drinking from Good Friday, the day of the Lord's Passion, Crucifixion and death through Easter morning in sympathy with the life-giving Passion undergone by our Lord Jesus Christ for our sake and for the salvation of humanity in fulfillment of St. Paul's words: "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection." (Rom. 6:3,4).

The Church used to practise this fast and celebrate the commemoration of Lord Jesus' Passion and His Resurrection once every thirty three years. The Church, however, started celebrating this fast annually due to the fact that a lot of people were born and died without having had the chance of witnessing this commemorative observance. Four days were eventually added to the beginning of this fast to form one whole week, called Passion Week, during which people would abstain from eating or drinking until late afternoon and would breakfast by eating just bread and drinking salty water. Nowadays people abstain from eating till noon or the afternoon and then eat, fasting food free from meat and animal products consisting of cereals, beans and fruits. People abstained even from eating sweets in sympathy with the Passion of the Redeemer Who was given, when thirsty, vinegar mixed with gall.

Lent (40 days Fasting)

It was in the third century AD that Lent was instituted. The Fast of Passion Week, practised a long time earlier, was added to it in the second quarter of the fourth century. With the addition of Passion Week, Lent, therefore, lasted seven weeks. Lent was enjoined on the faithful as a reminder of the struggle of the Lord Jesus and of His fasting in the wilderness.

The Lord, Who is in no need for fasting, started His public divine economy in the flesh by fasting. "He fasted forty days and forty nights. He was afterwards hungered." (Matt. 4:2). He did this in order to teach us the practice of fasting and the spiritual struggle against Satan. He triumphed over Satan, the tempter, and endowed us with the power to defeat Satan in the name of the Lord. Moreover, He revealed to us the mystery of spiritual triumph saying: "How be it this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." (Matt. 17:21).

The faithful used to practise Lent by abstaining from eating and drinking until the afternoon, then they would eat just bread, beans, cereals, fruits and vegetable oils and drink salted water. During Lent they used to give alms to the poor. In the fourth century, St. Ephrem, the Syrian (+373) said in reference to this:

"Oh faithful, fast during Lent and give your bread to the poor as alms. Pray seven times daily as taught by David, the Prophet, the son of Jesse."

Ecclesiastical laws stipulated that all the faithful should observe Holy Lent. Strict church sentences were imposed on clergy and laity who violated these laws.

No fast practised by abstinence from food and drink is allowed on Saturdays and Sundays. On these two days the Holy Liturgy is usually celebrated and after the Holy Liturgy the abstainer usually eats fasting food. In this context the teachings of the Apostles stipulated the following: "Every clergy who fasts on Sunday or Saturday, except for the Saturday of Light, shall be divested of his rank, and every layman shall be excommunicated." In his book "*The Dove*", written for the benefit of monks and hermits who had no guides, the scholar Bar 'Ebroyo (+1286) stated: "Fasting shall not be observed on Saturdays and Sundays in compliance with laws."

In sanctification of Sunday, our Holy Syrian Church does not start any fast on a Sunday. In the event of such coincidence, fasting starts on Monday morning in honor of Lord's day and consequently the number of fasting days will be one day less that year.

No wedding festivities were permitted during Lent pursuant to a decision taken by the Council of Laodicea in 364. That Council prohibited also the celebration of the Holy Liturgy and of the commemoration of martyrs on any day in Lent other than Saturdays and Sundays.

During Lent, the celebration of the Holy Liturgy was replaced by the celebration of the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, introduced to our Church by Patriarch Mor Severus the Great (+538) early in the sixth century. During Lent the Holy Liturgy is celebrated only on Saturdays and Sundays, except for Mid Lent and the 40th Friday of Lent, Maundy Thursday, and Saturday of Lights. In the event of having Annunciation day falling during Lent, the Holy Liturgy is usually celebrated on that day even if it falls on Good Friday. The faithful eat fasting food after the Liturgy.

The fifth canon of Bar 'Ebroyo's *Nomocanon*, first section, chapter five, stipulates the following: "The Church celebrates the Annunciation day whatever day it may fall" as it is the basis of all the Lord's days. Accordingly, no shifting of Holy Days is ever allowed. In respect of fasting on Good Friday or the Saturday of Light, the believers refrain from food or drink on those two days and say the prayer assigned for those days. In the event that the Presentation of the Lord Jesus in the Temple falls on Monday of Lent, which scarcely happens, then the Holy Liturgy shall be celebrated. This took place in 1915 and will also take place in 2010. In such a case, the Liturgy of the commemorative day shall be celebrated as usual in the morning. The prayer said for fasting shall be recited at noon. The faithful will then stop his or her abstinence from eating. The prayer of forgiveness (*shubqono*) is postponed till the next morning.

The Church prohibited drinking wine and all alcoholic drinks during fasts. The Holy Church's objective of devoting days for fasting is not to prohibit eating certain kinds of food and allow others. It rather aims at subjugating the will of the faithful to God Almighty through chastity and practice of sublime virtues, especially the virtue of obedience to God's commands as articulated by His ministering servants, the bishops of the Church who were vested with the authority to loosen and bind, to enact laws and set acts and ordinances for the benefit of the faithful and for the glorification of God's Holy Name.

The Church is a kind mother and a good teacher and as such does not lay on the shoulders of the faithful burdens too heavy to bear in observance of God's words: "Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! For ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers." (Lk. 11:46). Based on this concept the late Patriarch Elias III of blessed memory (+1932) permitted eating fish during Lent and allowed the faithful in America to fast only the first and last weeks of Lent in addition to Wednesdays and Fridays. He permitted the rest of Lent to be without fasting.

In response to the petition submitted by the Church of India, the late Patriarch Aphrem I Barsoum (+1957) of blessed memory, had similar steps taken in relevance to this in addition to shortening the

periods of other fasts for all the faithful in 1946. In 1966 the late Patriarch Yacoub III of blessed Memory (+1980) permitted the clergy and laity to fast only the first and last weeks of Lent in addition to Wednesdays and Fridays, permitting them to eat other food during the rest of Lent. He also permitted having festivities, weddings, baptism, liturgies and commemorations on all the days that fall between the two aforementioned weeks.

This tolerance shown by our predecessors, the blessed Patriarchs, towards the faithful by curtailing the period of fasting during Lent is but an expression of mercy lest the faithful, God forbid, might violate the law and be subject to God Almighty's wrath. Therefore, whoever benefits from this tolerance shall not be considered as sinful but as abiding by the law. Whoever fasts all the days of Lent, in addition to Passion Week, shall be doubly rewarded by God.

Clergy of all hierarchical ranks, except for the sick and the elderly among them, must set a good example for the faithful and be their model in observance of the Lord's acts and His holy laws by being committed to fasting in Lent and during the life-giving Passion Week as practised by our Holy Forefathers. This can be achieved by abstaining from food and drink from midnight till after the next mid day. The faithful eat afterwards fasting food free of fat. This exemplary way of fasting is highly favored.

Twice a week fast, Wednesday and Friday

Ever since the end of the first century AD, the Holy Church instituted weekly fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays instead of the Monday and Thursday fast practised by pious Jews as illustrated by the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk. 18:12).

Christians fast on Wednesday because it was on that day that the Jews plotted to arrest the Lord Jesus and kill Him. They fast on Friday because it is the day on which the Jews crucified the Lord Jesus and the day he died on the Cross for our salvation.

A reference to this fast is found in the book titled *The Teachings of the Apostles*, which dates back to the end of the first century or the beginning of the second century AD, and in the works of some Fathers of the first century AD. According to the Apostles' teachings both clergy and laity who fail to observe this fast shall be pronounced anathema and excommunicated.

It was the custom of the Church in early times not to have fasting observed on Wednesdays and Fridays which fall between Easter and Pentecost. Likewise in the event of having a feast day of the Lord, or a commemoration day of either the Virgin Mary or of a Patron Saint of the local church or of the region falling on either day. It was the custom of later generations to allow non-adherence to fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays falling between Christmas and Epiphany.

The faithful in our dioceses in Iraq do not fast on Fridays falling between the Holy Fast of Nineveh and Holy Lent, which are the Friday of all priests, Friday of souls of alien faithful, and the Friday of souls of all faithful.

Nowadays, the faithful fast on Wednesdays and Fridays by abstaining from eating till noon when they eat fasting food. Alternatively, they may have fasting food in the morning and at noon.

It is preferable that the faithful eat fasting food throughout Wednesdays and Fridays from the evening through the next evening, the way our forefathers practised fasting since the dawn of Christianity.

Christmas Fast

The institution of this fast was towards the beginning of the fourth century AD. This can be gathered from reading the poems of St. Ephrem the Syrian (+373) and the hymns he composed in the fourth century. Christmas Fast is practised in preparation for commemorating and welcoming the day of the Birth of Lord Jesus in the flesh and in memory of the grief brought by sin, which we experienced before the Lord's Birth, the darkness of ignorance, Satan's enslavement of us and the infliction of the created world in expectation of salvation accomplished through the birth of the Savior Who redeemed us by His incarnation. We practise this fast to become pure in our souls and body and be worthy of welcoming the commemoration of the Redeemer's Birth, the Word of God incarnate, the way Moses fasted before the written word of God, that is the Law of the Old Testament was handed over to him.

Christmas fast used to last for forty days. The Church, however, shortened the period to twenty-five days. In 1946 and pursuant to a decision taken by the Synod held in Homs, the late Patriarch Ephrem I Barsoum of blessed memory reduced it to ten days starting on December 15 and ending on Christmas Day, Dec. 25.

Fast of the Apostles

It was named as such out of the custom of calling something after the name of the one who instituted that thing. It is only God to Whom fasting is due. The practice of this fast means following in the footsteps of the Apostles (Heb. 13:7) who observed it in fulfillment of the Lord Jesus' words: "The days will come when the Bridegroom shall be taken from them and then shall they fast." (Matt. 9:15). After the Ascension of the Lord Jesus to heaven and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, they started to fast. In reference to this the following is stated in the Acts of the Apostles: "As they ministered to the Lord and fasted." (Acts 13:2).

The duration of this fast differed in length based on the Julian Calendar of Easter. Starting accordingly on the next day after Pentecost and ending on the feast day of St. Peter and St. Paul, the two chief Apostles.

By virtue of a decision taken by the Synod of Homs in 1946, the duration of this fast was shortened to three days starting on June 26 and ending with the commemorative of the two chief Apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul on June 29.

Fast of the Virgin Mary

We do practise this fast in preparation for the celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and in following in her footsteps and those of the Holy Apostles who fasted at the Dormition of the Virgin Mary. This fast used to last for fifteen days, but pursuant to the decision taken by the Synod of Homs in 1946, it became five days starting on August 10 and ending on the Assumption Day of the Virgin Mary, August 15.

By virtue of the Patriarchal encyclical issued on December 7, 1946 by Patriarch Ephrem I Barsoum, of celebrated memory, the old periods of the Christmas fast, the Virgin Mary's Fast and Apostle' Fasts referred to in the Nomocanon of Bar 'Ebroyo were cancelled and substituted by new periods set by the Patriarch become the new law in force.

Nineveh's Fast

It was called after Nineveh because the Ninevites were the first to practise such a fast praying for God's mercy and forgiveness. This fast is practised following the example of the people of Nineveh of old times

who hearkened to the warning of God through Prophet Jonah and proclaimed a fast enjoined on man and beast from the greatest to the least in supplication of God. And God relented from the disaster He said He would do unto them and he did it not. (Jon. 3:10).

This fast began to be practiced in our Church towards the fourth century A.D. This can be inferred from the writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian (+373) and the hymns he composed. This fast used to last for six days, but now is only for three days starting on the third Monday which precedes Lent. It had been neglected through the ages. Mor Dionysius Bar Salibi (+1171) states that Mor Marutha of Tikrit (+649) was the one who enjoined it on the Church of the East first in the region of Nineveh. Bar 'Ebroyo-quoting others-states that the confirmation of this fast was due to the crises the Church went through in Hira. The people there fasted three days and three nights, praying constantly in fulfillment of the command of their bishop, and they were rescued from the ordeal by God.

The Armenians embraced this practice of the Syrians, calling it Sourp Sarkis. The Copts did the same during the reign of the sixty-second Patriarch of Alexandria, Abba Abram the Syrian. This fast is highly favored among faithful. Some faithful abstain from food and drink throughout the three days, receiving Holy Communion on the third day and continuing to eat fasting food until Thursday morning. The rest of the faithful abstain from having food till noon or till late afternoon and afterwards eat fasting food. Prayers which are sung to melodies of Lent usually accompany fasting. In the event of having the Presentation of the Lord Jesus in the Temple, which we usually celebrate on February 2nd, during this fast it is mandatory that we observe the feast celebrating the Holy Liturgy in the morning as usual. The prayers of Nineveh's Fast are then said at noon. Abstinence from food ends directly after the Liturgy by eating fasting food.