

Father John Wehling
Holy Transfiguration Orthodox Church
Livonia, MI

On Monday we began the Dormition Fast, a two-week fasting period in preparation for the feast of the Dormition, or Falling Asleep of the Mother of God, on August 15. Few things in the Church elicit the negative reaction from Orthodox Christians that fasting does. Just mention fasting and many of those in the Church start to groan and grumble, “cradles” and “converts” alike.

The reason for this grumbling seems, on the surface, to be pretty obvious: we like to eat. But very few Orthodox Christians in this day and age significantly limit the amount of food that we eat when we fast. We simply eat the same amount of different foods. And with the popularity of the vegan diet on the rise, there are many more fast-friendly foods available to us in America today than in the past: fresh fruits and veggies; vegan foods; veggie-burgers/hot dogs/brats; you name it. Yet still we complain about fasting with a feeling usually reserved for taxes and visits to the dentist.

The real issue for many of us with fasting, then, is not only that we like to eat, but that we like to eat *what we like* to eat. Meaning, the underlying issue isn't really food at all, but rather our frustration (or outright anger) at being told that we cannot have what we want.

In spiritual terms we call this an issue of the will. The fathers compare the will to the reins of a chariot. It is not the power or energy source; that is the horses that pull the chariot. Rather, it is the ability to direct that energy toward a destination of our choosing. But one of the problems with the human person in our fallen condition is that the will does not function the way it was made to function. Rather than guiding the energies and powers of the human person, it simply becomes enslaved to them and follows them. This is the equivalent to dropping the reins and letting the horses take the chariot wherever they want to go rather than harnessing their power to have them take you where you want to go. When the stomach or any of our desires control our will it is the same as letting the horses steer the chariot...often right over a cliff.

This is where fasting comes in and why it is so important. Let us first, though, emphasize what fasting NOT. Fasting is not about food being impure or unclean. Fasting is not about getting on God's “good side” by obeying His rules. Fasting is not simply about developing more self-control, because one can be incredibly self-controlled and still full of pride, which is the worst passion of all (as the fathers point out, the devil never eats but he is full of pride).

What, then, is fasting all about? Fasting is about cutting off our own will so that we can do God's will. We say in the Lord's Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done.” And in the Garden of Gethsemane our Lord gives us an example by praying, “Not my will but Thine be done,” thereby showing us that our will must be aligned with God's will. But as long as our will is enslaved to our desires and passions this will never happen. We will have the illusion that our

will is free (because we are attempting to satisfy our desires) but the reality will be otherwise (because our desires are never really satisfied by any created thing and so they will demand more and more and more....). Fasting cuts off our will, breaking the cords that bind it to our passions, so that it can be reintegrated in Christ and realigned toward its proper destination: the Kingdom of God. Or, to use our chariot analogy, fasting takes the reins away from the horses and puts them back in the hands of the driver.

There is a paradox here: we are only truly free when, as St Paul says, we are the slaves of Christ. We can remain the slaves of our own desires, which are a terrible master who is never satisfied. Or we can undertake, through fasting and the other ascetical disciplines of our faith, the cutting off of our own will so that we can be the servants of Christ, the Bread of Life. His promise to us is good and true: “whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”