



Christmas is coming... and how will we prepare?

As society prepares for Christmas by shopping, decorating, cooking, baking, and celebrating, the Church suggests that we take time to fast, to focus on God and others. Ukrainian Catholics refer to the pre-Christmas fast period as *Pylypiwka* or St. Philip's Fast, as it always begins on November 15, the day after the Feast of St. Philip the Apostle.

Fasting has the special consequence of putting things into proper perspective. It is a process by which we become free from and independent of all material things. And as we free ourselves from things outside of ourselves, we also free ourselves from the passions within us that are keeping our interior life in chains. This new freedom will make room in our body for new values. Therefore, fasting liberates us from a kind of bondage and sets us free to enjoy happiness. Fasting allows us to *feel* our hunger. And feeling our physical hunger can, if we allow it, lead us to feel our spiritual hunger, *our hunger for God*.

But how can we live out this counter-cultural pre-Christmas season? Do we decline all festive invitations and never set foot in a mall? The Church teaches us that the demands of love come first. Our actions must be loving and charitable, putting the needs of others first. If we are invited to participate in a pre-Christmas gathering, the right thing to do just may be to 'fast from fasting'.

It is important to approach the fasting with the right attitude. Set for yourselves modest and humble goals. Your fasting can include your exclusion of certain foods or luxuries from your daily routine. While fasting from food, we are challenged to fast from sin, from gossip, from jealousy, from anger, and from other things which, while well within our control, we all too often allow to control us.

Re-direct some of your spare time to give attention to the needs of others around you. We all thirst and need to receive love. Search for ways to give love freely to those who need it most, but might deserve it least. Your life was a gift from God; make it a gift from God to others. Jesus is the greatest gift of all. Introduce Him to a friend or neighbor by inviting them to your church. Offer the needs of others in prayer.

We fast before the Nativity in order to more fully feast and celebrate on the Nativity itself: To acknowledge, obey and give gratitude to God; to beseech His protection and favor; and to be united in asking for pardon, and in promoting our faith – these are all essential for the preparation to celebrate the joy of Christmas; we pray more and we increase our acts of love and compassion. The goal is to free ourselves from our selfish desires, and to be Christ focused.

Let us approach this time of preparation in the hope that it allows us to experience a new awareness of God's presence, to realize our need for God, and an increasing desire to love and serve others. Let us then on the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord all joyfully sing, "God with us" and celebrate on Christmas day and on the days that follow!

Adapted from *St. Philip's Fast—A Time to Re-focus* by Deborah Larmour
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