

Pylypiwka - The Pre Christmas Fast Week #1

A Journey of Expectation, Preparation and Fulfilment

Fasting periods prior to feast days are meant to prepare us for the feast. Unlike the Great Fast prior to Pascha (Easter), the Pre Christmas fast is seldom practised, and many do not even know of its existence. This is partly because a detailed structure was never established for this fast. Yet this 40 day preparation period should be preserved and practised.

This is an ancient fast. The Feast of the Nativity was added to the church calendar in Rome in the 4th century. The fast was practiced as early as 567 AD in various forms for various lengths of time. Eventually it became a 40 day fast that mimics the Great Fast prior to Pascha and was a very strict fast.

The Feasts of the Nativity and the Resurrection are the bookends of Christ's life on earth. The mystery of the Incarnation is the door to our salvation and Resurrection brings us new life. The incarnation of God in flesh happens for a purpose. The saving death on the cross casts a shadow back on the birth of the child. "For our sake long suffering Saviour, You were placed in the animal's manger."

This is our focus during this preparation time: the self emptying of God to take the form of a slave, for the salvation of our souls. How much does our God love us to do this great deed!

*Adapted from Christ is Born: A Journey of Expectation, Preparation, and Fulfillment; Office of Religious Education, Archeparchy of Pittsburgh, 2005: **pages 6-7***

Fasting

The word "fast" means not eating all or certain foods. The purpose of fasting is to remind us of the Scriptural teaching, "Man does not live by bread alone." The needs of the body are nothing compared to the needs of the soul. Above all else, we need God, who provides everything for both the body and the soul. Fasting teaches us to depend on God more fully. The first sin of our parents, Adam and Eve, was eating from the forbidden tree (*Genesis 3:1-19*). We fast from food, or a food item, as a reminder that we are to fast from sinning and doing evil.

Ukrainian Catholics refer to the pre-Christmas fast period as *Pylypiwka* or St. Philip's Fast, as it always begins on November 15th, the day after the feast of St. Philip the Apostle. It ends on December 24th. This fast once had very strict rules. Today, the Church encourages us to abstain from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays. We are also required to practice the spirit of sacrifice, penance, especially charity. To prepare to celebrate the joy of Christmas, we fast, we pray more and we increase our acts of love and compassion. **Even though there may be nothing wrong with parties and celebrations in themselves, they do seem to be inconsistent with the spirit of fasting and preparation of this pre- Christmas season.** It is much better to schedule these during the Nativity-Theophany season, during the time of the feast when it is truly a celebration.

Fasting is a call for conversion directed to our body, and 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.

It is important to approach the fasting with the right attitude. It does not make sense to abstain from meat on Friday only to go out to an elegant lobster dinner. It is essential that an inner fast accompany the outer fast. Fasting involves not just food, but the entire being. Our mouths should fast from off-color, offensive or hurtful words. Our eyes should fast from things they shouldn't see, perhaps movies or television programs that do not promote Christian values. Our ears should fast from listening to things they shouldn't, like gossip and music that goes against moral integrity. Our minds should fast from thoughts that aren't compatible with our lives as Christians.

Constant activities and a hectic pace of life are the enemies of a healthy spiritual life. One of the ways that we can fast in this season is to let go of our frenzied pace of life. We need to take time to sit at the feet of the Lord and dwell in His presence. Let us approach this season of preparation in the hope that this time allows us to experience a new awareness of God's presence, and our need for God.

The Feast of the Presentation of the Theotokos

November 21



During the first week of Pylypiwka we have the Feast of the presentation of Mary into the temple. Although this feast has no basis in history, it stresses an important truth about Mary: From the beginning of her life, she was dedicated to God. She herself became a greater temple than any made by hands. God came to dwell in her in a marvellous manner and sanctified her for her unique role in God's saving work.

This feast reminds us of our fundamental vocation, which is the call to holiness; we are all called to be holy. Like Mary, our first and foremost mission in this life is to live holy lives. To live a holy life is a tall order but it is not impossible. It is through God's grace that we can fulfill this vocation and mission. The Letter of Paul reminds us of this sublime reality: "The grace of the Lord is enough for those who strive to live good and holy lives." (cf. 2 Corinthians, 12:9).

May the Feast of the Presentation of Mary urge us all to strive to live our lives in fulfillment of this vocation to holiness. May the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary inspire us to always do the will of God even in difficult situations. Pray for us, dear Mother of God, so that we may remain faithful to the will of God and also be worthy bearers of the Word of Life. Amen.

THE ARK OF THE COVENANT AND THE MOTHER OF GOD

The Ark of the Covenant contained the gift of God: the Law and manna. Now a Living Ark will contain more than the gift: it will contain God Himself, the Word made flesh, the heavenly bread. The Old and New Testaments are fulfilled. This is the entire meaning of the feast of the entrance into the temple of the Mother of God: Mary as the new Ark enters the Temple and finds her place within the "Holy of Holies."



Resource:

Christ is Born: A Journey of Expectation, Preparation, and Fulfillment; Office of Religious Education, Archeparchy of Pittsburgh, 2005

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