

# **An Encyclical Concerning the Apostles' Fast**

by Bishop Ephraim

This encyclical was written in 1989. Its inclusion in *The True Vine* is especially appropriate this year, in which the Apostles' Fast will be longer than usual, that is, from May 21/June 3 to the feast of the Apostles, a total of 39 days.

My Beloved Brethren and Children in Christ,

In the introduction to his Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, Saint John Chrysostom observes that many Christians of that time did not even know of the existence of this particular book of the New Testament.

Certainly, although such a state of affairs is inexcusable from one point of view (since the era we are referring to is known as the "Golden Age" of the Church Fathers), yet, on the other hand, it is somewhat understandable. It is true, after all, that in those times there were no printing presses, books had to be copied by hand and were, as a result, very expensive, and literacy was not so widespread as it is today—or, to be more precise, as we assume it is today.

Yet, even now, in the "Age of Information" in which we live, there are Christians who, though aware of the existence of the Acts of the Apostles, yet are quite unacquainted with the incidents recorded in that book, and when one is speaking with such individuals, one realizes that they are hearing of these sacred events for the first time. This, indeed, is certainly inexcusable.

But while we marvel at the fact that there were Christians in past centuries who did not know of the existence of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, what is equally grievous is that, today, there are many who profess to be Orthodox Christians and who, nonetheless, have never heard that there is such a thing as the Fast of the Holy Apostles.

Although this is discouraging, it is comprehensible to some degree,

because if the leaders of the faithful—the bishops and clergy—do not observe this fast, and, consequently, by their own example do not encourage their flocks to keep this fast, then it is not surprising that the simple lay people are unaware of the existence of such a fast.

Unfortunately, the ignorance that prevails in regard to this particular fast is not found here in our hemisphere only, where Orthodox Christianity arrived only some two centuries ago. This state of affairs can be found even in the Orthodox homelands; many of which were evangelized by the Apostles themselves. The cities of Palestine, Asia Minor, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, the southern Slavic lands, and Western Europe all heard the preaching of the Holy Apostles—indeed, their shrines and holy relics are still to be found in such cities as Thessalonica, Corinth, Patras, and Athens. Nonetheless, the ignorance regarding the Fast of the Holy Apostles that can be found here, in a land the Apostles never visited, prevails also in the lands where they themselves proclaimed the good tidings of our redemption and salvation.

In order to better illustrate this point, it would be helpful to mention an incident that happened here in North America a few years ago.

The occasion for this incident was a meeting held under the auspices of the World Council of Churches (WCC) at an Orthodox seminary in our hemisphere. The purpose of this particular conference was to ascertain the Orthodox response to the "Lima Statement."<sup>1</sup> Thus, representatives from all the Eastern and "Oriental"<sup>2</sup> Orthodox churches were present. Most of the Eastern Orthodox representatives were bishops, a few were priests, and even fewer were lay theologians. The meeting itself, which was under the chairmanship of a Lutheran representative of the WCC, took place during the month of June, during the Fast of the Holy Apostles.

During the whole conclave, which lasted one week, there were only two individuals who abstained from the great variety of non-fasting foods that were offered in the seminary cafeteria, and these two were an Egyptian bishop, Bishol, and an Ethiopian archbishop, Grigorios. Of the Orthodox representatives who were present—whether they were bishops, priests, or

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<sup>1</sup>A document prepared at a WCC meeting in Lima, Peru. The aim of this document is to bring about a doctrinal consensus and "convergence" on the subjects of baptism, the eucharist, and the ministry among the WCC's Protestant and Orthodox members.

<sup>2</sup>This is a term that has come into use of late in Ecumenist circles to designate the Monophysitic communities in the East which do not accept the Fourth Ecumenical Council. They are also referred to as "non-Chalcedonians."

laymen— not one was observing the Fast. After the first two days, it became evident that the two "non-Chalcedonian" bishops were eating nothing except some salads and fruit. Consequently, the dean of the seminary asked the two bishops if there were some medical reason why they were not eating, and he offered to bring them special meals from outside. The bishops thanked the dean, but declined his kind offer, and explained that this was the period of the Fast of the Apostles, which is strictly kept by their churches. The bishops explained that they came from impoverished countries, where the standard of living is not what it is in our part of the world, and that the abundance and variety of the salads and fruit served during this meeting were much more than they would have had available back in their own countries.

To be fair, it must be said that a few of the Orthodox delegates became somewhat self-conscious because of the two non-Chalcedonians who were keeping the Fast, and they commented in a conversation that since this was not a "primary" fast, dairy products (cheese, eggs, etc.) could be eaten, but not meat.<sup>1</sup> It never occurred to these clergy that since, in any case, most of them were monastics by tonsure, the eating of flesh-meat is not permitted to them throughout the whole year, whether it is a period of fasting or not.

It is no wonder, then, that so many lay people are totally unaware of the existence of this fast. Consequently, in this part of the world, many Orthodox perform weddings during this fast, following the "June bride" tradition of our non-Orthodox and secular society.

At this point, I believe it would be useful and instructive to explain a distinctive mark of this particular fast—that is, how its length is determined by the date of Pascha.

As we know from ancient texts, the First Ecumenical Council determined that the Feast of Pascha could fall no earlier than March 22 and no later than April 25. Eight weeks after the Feast of Pascha, we celebrate the Sunday of All Saints. Immediately on the next day, Monday, we begin the Fast of the Holy Apostles, which lasts until June 29, the Feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul.

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<sup>1</sup>Where the above-mentioned Orthodox churchmen found these distinctions still remains a mystery, since no Orthodox Church council—ecumenical or local—and no Church Father, and no Church tradition speaks of "primary" or "secondary" fasts.

In other words, depending on the date of Pascha, the Apostles' Fast can begin as early as May 18 or as late as June 21. Thus, it may be as short as eight days or as long as forty-two days in duration.

We know, of course, that the primary concern of the Church Fathers in determining all these matters was not astronomical accuracy or the observance of days and seasons, but rather that the Church should have unanimity and concord in celebrating its feasts and fasts.

This unanimity and concord was broken in 1924 when the State Church of Greece and the Church of Constantinople, and later some other local churches, changed to the new calendar, despite the fact that many Orthodox Church Councils had already condemned and forbidden such a change. As a result of this change of the calendar, Pascha often falls after April 25 on the new calendar, even though this is not allowed by the Church Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council. Indeed, for those who follow the new calendar, Pascha sometimes falls even in May, and thus the Fast of the Holy Apostles is obliterated totally.

However, this holy Fast is very important for several reasons. First of all, it was instituted, my beloved brethren, out of thanksgiving towards the Apostles of Christ. It is an ancient fast, as the homilies of Saint Leo the Great, Pope of Rome (+461), bear witness. It was established so that we might show our gratitude for the persecutions, beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, and death itself, which they endured so that the Jewish people and the nations might hear and accept the tidings and the promise of our deliverance from the bonds of death and corruption, which was accomplished for us through Christ our Saviour.

Even as we observe a fast every Wednesday and Friday in commemoration of our Saviour's betrayal and crucifixion, so do we likewise keep this holy Fast in order that we may identify with the privations and the sufferings that the Apostles willingly endured in our behalf. In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul describes how many labors, whippings, and imprisonments he endured, and he goes on to say:

Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in vigils often, in hunger and thirst, in

fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

(II Cor. 11:25-27)

And elsewhere in the same Epistle he describes how those who are ministers of God serve:

In much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in scourgings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in vigils, in fastings . . . in the word of truth, in the power of God, by the weapons of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honour and dishonour, by evil fame and good fame; as deceivers, and yet truthful; as ones unknown, and yet well known; as ones dying, and behold, we live; as ones chastened, and not killed; as ones grieved, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as ones having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

(II Con 6:4-10)

We have as our example the first Christians of the Apostolic era who "prayed unceasingly" when Peter was imprisoned, and we know that these unceasing prayers were accompanied with fasting and vigil. All these elements were simply part of the one interwoven fabric of Christian piety. When one member suffered, the whole body suffered. When one rejoiced, all rejoiced. The Christians felt very keenly that they were members one of another in the Body of Christ. They were not indifferent to the joys and sorrows of the other faithful, nor did they have the concept of "every man for himself." And this precisely is why Saint Paul commends the faithful when he writes: "Ye did well in becoming sharers in my affliction" (Phil. 4:14).

And at the end of his Epistle to the Colossians, Saint Paul's final admonition is: "Remember my bonds" (Col. 4:18). This is exactly what we are doing when we keep the fast in honor of the Holy Apostles. We are remembering their bonds.

One may say: "We are not living in the days of the Apostles. If we were living in their days, when they were imprisoned and suffered afflictions, then we too would fast and pray fervently for them." But individuals who speak in this manner show, first of all, that they have forgotten what our Saviour taught us in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, where he says:

Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand: "Come, ye

blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and ye gave Me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took Me in; naked, and ye clothed Me; I was sick, and ye visited Me; I was in prison, and ye came unto Me." Then shall the righteous answer Him, saying, "Lord, when saw we Thee hungry, and fed Thee? or thirsty, and gave Thee drink? When saw we Thee a stranger, and took Thee in? or naked, and clothed Thee? Or when saw we Thee sick, or in prison, and came unto Thee?" And the King shall answer and say unto them, "Amen, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me."

(Matt. 25:34-40)

Are there not Christians today, my beloved, who are imprisoned or discriminated against, who are mocked; jeered at, and persecuted because of their Faith, even as the Apostles were in their day? Yea, the Apostles are persecuted and mocked in every generation. Indeed, our Saviour Himself is present in each and every Christian who proclaims the truth and who bears true witness to the Gospel—in fact, our English word "martyr" comes from the Greek word *martyr*, which means "witness." Therefore, in every generation, pious Christians become communicants and sharers with the Apostles in their bonds and sufferings in actual fact, and we too share in their affliction and patient endurance by practicing "fasting, vigils, and prayer."

But then, even if for no other reason, we should offer supplications and prayers and observe the fast in honor of the Apostles simply out of gratitude and thanksgiving for the labors and sufferings they endured in our behalf. This, in itself, will make us more sensitive to the needs of others, and to the hardships they are enduring, and will also strengthen us spiritually; for it will teach us to place a rein on our selfishness and on the desire for instant gratification that is cultivated so intensely by our secular society and is abetted by our own fallen nature.

As Saint Leo the Great, Pope of Rome, teaches us:

Today's festival [of Pentecost], dearly beloved, hallowed by the descent of the Holy Spirit, is followed, as you know, by a solemn fast, which being a salutary institution for the healing of soul and body, we must keep with devout observance.... Therefore, after the days of holy gladness, which we have devoted to the honor of the Lord rising from

the dead and then ascending into Heaven, and after receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, a fast is ordained as a wholesome and needful practice, so that, if perchance through neglect or disorder even amid the joys of the festival any undue license has broken out, it may be corrected by the remedy of strict abstinence, which must be the more scrupulously carried out in order that what was on this day divinely bestowed on the Church may abide in us. For being made the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and watered with a greater supply than ever by the Divine Stream, we ought not to be conquered by any lusts nor held in possession by any vices in order that the habitation of divine power may be stained with no pollution.

*(Homily Severity-eight)*

Fasting, vigil, and fervent prayer—this, indeed, is how Christians celebrate the holy feasts, as Saint Athanasius the Great also emphasizes in the beautiful Paschal Encyclical that he addressed to his flock in the year 342.

Therefore, I enjoin you to keep this holy Fast, and to await it every year joyously, and to look forward to it as an occasion of gratitude. Cherish it as an opportunity to share in the patient endurance of those who are persecuted and mocked for the sake of our Saviour, my beloved Christians.

As Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians:

Our hope for you is steadfast, knowing that, even as ye have become communicants of our sufferings, so shall ye be also of our consolation.

(II Cor. 1:7)

I pray that the grace and peace of God the Father, and His Only-begotten Son, and His All-holy and Life-creating Spirit be with you, by the intercessions of the Holy Apostles and of all the Saints. Amen. So be it.

Your fervent suppliant unto God,  
✠ Ephraim, Bishop of Boston

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