

THE HOLY ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF BOSTON
His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

LENTEN ENCYCLICAL
of
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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In 1990, my beloved Orthodox Christians, I prepared an article for the *Orthodox Christian Witness*, on the subject of fasting, entitled, "Trick Me, O God, and Save Me." It dealt with the fact that we spiritually-weak humans need incentives and all the help we can get in fulfilling our spiritual obligations in our secular and irreligious world, and how the high ecological costs in maintaining a diet high in meat and dairy products can serve as another — admittedly, less than God-inspired — reason for observing the holy fasts. Here is the text of this article.

"TRICK ME, O GOD, AND SAVE ME"

or

Another Reason for Keeping the Holy Fasts on a Small Planet

As Orthodox Christians, we are constantly instructed about the spiritual importance of the Church's discipline of fasting. These admonitions reach us through the Holy Scriptures, the Divine Services — especially those of Holy and Great Lent — and the Lives of the Saints. The holy canons also speak about the significance and necessity of reverencing these holy seasons of spiritual and physical abstinence.

With grief, we are aware that many who consider themselves Orthodox Christians and who belong to jurisdictions that are of an ecumenistic turn of mind have by and large abandoned the traditional rules of fasting, to the degree that they do not abstain even from meat during the greater part of Great Lent or the Nativity Fast.

Thus, without realizing it, they deprive themselves of many spiritual lessons and benefits, and they also eliminate the heroic element that is an integral part of the life in Christ.

In one of his sermons, Metropolitan Philaret of blessed memory mentioned an incident from the Life of Saint Seraphim of Sarov that underlines the importance of the holy fasts. A mother once came to the Saint, concerned about how she might arrange the best possible marriage for her young daughter. When she came to Saint Seraphim for advice, he said to her: "Before all else, ensure that he whom your daughter chooses as her companion for life keeps the fasts. If he does not, then he is not a Christian, whatever he may consider himself to be." Thus we see how one of the greatest saints of the Orthodox Church, Saint Seraphim of Sarov, a man who knew better than we what Orthodoxy is, spoke concerning the fasts.

But if many are unable to understand the spiritual necessity of keeping the Church's fasts as they are set forth for us in the liturgical books and canonical texts, perhaps they may be persuaded by other, more secular reasons for practicing abstinence from certain foods during the appointed times of the year. And, perhaps, once they get themselves into the habit of doing this for ecological, sociological, biological or some other less than sublime reasons, at some stage in their spiritual trek they might be able to shift gears, as it were, and go forward on another level of understanding -- the Church's understanding. In other words, they might ultimately trick themselves into doing the right thing for the right reason.

It was in this spirit that the Desert Fathers, when considering our reluctant and fickle response to God, would oftentimes exclaim: "Trick me, O God, and save me!"

The observations below are portions from a letter written to the editor of an English-language newspaper, published abroad. In a few words, it sums up nicely — in purely secular terms — why we should abstain from certain foods.

There have been many recent articles about water shortages throughout the world. Some agricultural analysts have predicted that the world will run out of water before it runs out of food.

Most of the water consumed daily is used for agriculture, especially livestock agriculture. A shift toward vegetarian diets would be a major step in reducing water shortages throughout the world.

Over half the water consumed in the United States is used to irrigate land growing livestock feed. The production of just one pound of meat uses 2,500 gallons of water. While a typical meat-eater's diet requires 4,000 gallons daily, a pure vegetarian's diet only uses 300 gallons. It takes about a hundred times more water to produce a pound of meat than it does to produce a pound of grain.

Another important factor related to society's security is energy, and livestock agriculture requires far more than the production of vegetarian foods. The production of one pound of steak uses 20,000 calories of fossil fuels, whereas it requires only 78 calories of fossil fuel for each calorie of protein obtained from vegetable sources.

Finally, a shift to diets with less meat and animal products would greatly reduce health costs, since flesh-centered diets have been linked to heart attacks, strokes, various forms of cancer and other diseases. This would free much money to help meet society's problems related to housing, unemployment and development.

As our precious planet is increasingly imperiled by ecothreats and water and other resource scarcities, the most important step that each person can take is to move toward a sensible and nutritious diet, with less meat in it.

We can think of six other good reasons for abstaining from meat and animal products (and thus conserve more water and energy!):

- 1] The Nativity Fast
- 2] The Holy and Great Lent
- 3] The Apostles' Fast
- 4] The Dormition Fast
- 5] Wednesdays (to commemorate the day on which our Saviour was betrayed.)
- 6] Fridays (to commemorate the day on which our Saviour was crucified.)

May God trick more of us into keeping all the holy rules of the physical and spiritual fasts, so that we may rejoice together at that everlasting Banquet of the Lamb of God, in the Heavenly Kingdom. Amen.

Your fervent suppliant unto God,

✠Ephraim, Metropolitan