

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

ENCYCLICAL FOR THE NATIVITY FAST
from
His Eminence Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

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

My Beloved Orthodox Christians:

Almost twenty-five years ago, I wrote an article for the *Orthodox Christian Witness*, published by the parish of St. Nectarios in Seattle, Washington. The article concerned the subject of fasting; here, in part, is what it had to say:

Fasting and Starvation in Our Days

Twenty-eight people die of starvation every minute. Of these, twenty-one are children. That means 40,320 a day, or about 14,716,800 a year, die from lack of food on our little planet.

Well-fed Americans probably find this hard to believe, but, unfortunately, it is true. What is even more unfortunate is that Americans and the inhabitants of the other developed countries have too much to eat, and must expend their surplus calories through diet clubs, exercise machines or jogging. Worse still, a good deal of the food is simply thrown into the garbage.

Meanwhile, twenty-eight human beings continue to die of starvation every minute.

When we were little children, one of our favorite games was playing "make-believe." By playing make-believe, our fertile little imaginations could transfigure a cardboard box into an airplane, a space ship or a cozy little hide-away. A stick could become a rifle, or a sword, and a moth-eaten old curtain could be transformed into a glamorous dress.

However, as we grew older, harsh reality intruded more and more into our make-believe world and finally swept it away, together with the toys and the other childish things.

But, for the sake of our present subject, perhaps we could again become like little children for a short time and let our imagination run wild. And while allowing our imagination to run wild, let us allow ourselves to play make-believe on a *really grand scale*. Let us pretend, for instance, that all the citizens of these United States of America were Orthodox Christians! And before incredulity catches up with us, let us take another giant leap into this land of make-believe, and let us pretend that all the citizens of the U.S.A. were *pious* Orthodox Christians who diligently kept all the Church's fasts!

Just consider what possibilities this presents to us. According to the latest census, there are approximately 237,345,000 people living in the United States at present. On the average, Americans consume about a half pound of meat a day, or a little over 180 pounds of meat a year.

In order to produce *one* pound of meat, livestock has to consume about *seven* pounds of grain. Seven pounds of grain for one pound of meat! Unbelievable as it may sound, ninety percent of the grain produced in this country is fed to livestock.

Orthodox Christians fast for almost half the year. Now if all Americans in our make-believe United States were *pious* Orthodox Christians who kept the fasts, this would mean that meat consumption in our pious country would be reduced almost by half. By calculating the amount of grain this would free for human consumption, and taking into account the average daily caloric requirement for adults and children, some simple mathematical equations bring us to the conclusion that the amount of surplus food resulting from our American Orthodox fasts would add up to an astounding *4,000 times* the amount needed to feed those who are presently starving to death! Were we to include eggs and dairy products in this calculation, the surplus would increase five-fold! Further, if Europe, England and the other developed countries were added to our calculations, we could safely conclude that, if the Church's fasts were faithfully kept, there would probably never be another hungry man, woman or child on earth as long as our civilization existed. Even if only everyone who is *now* an Orthodox Christian here in the U.S.A. kept the fasts, the resulting surplus would amount to well over 400 times the amount needed to feed those who are now starving to death!

Alas, however, how rudely we are brought back to reality. As we know, only a small percentage of our country's population is nominally Orthodox, and fewer still are those pious Orthodox

Christians who struggle to keep the holy fasts.

The article goes on to point out that few Christians today — including their leaders — acknowledge the many benefits that would come, not only to us, but to the entire world, if our Christian fasts and the other spiritual disciplines of our Church were observed more faithfully.

As the saying goes, "If you want to improve the world, begin with yourself." If you improve by one notch, the world has improved by one notch. If you slip and fall, the world slips and falls by one notch.

These are simple and obvious truths, my beloved, but it is necessary to remind ourselves of how much we need to apply them in our daily lives. Our selfless love, like our selfishness, affects all around us.

The article goes on to say:

In our small world, for better or worse, everything has a "ripple effect." "Acquire the Spirit of peace, and thousands will be saved around you," said Saint Seraphim of Sarov. The reverse of this is also true. "Acquire the spirit of self-indulgence and lack of reverence for the Church's traditions, and thousands will perish around you."

By our selfishness, are we not contributing to the suffering of our fellow human beings here on earth? By not setting a good example for the rest of society and by not denying ourselves, are we not also contributing to the hunger that is afflicting so many of our fellow human beings, many of whom die of starvation every day?

Truly, "the whole of creation groans and travails in pain together until now," says Saint Paul to the Romans. But in its groaning and travailing, our world does have one hope: "The earnest expectation of creation awaits the manifestation of the sons of God."

May these thoughts assist us in observing the holy fasts of the Church, my beloved.

Your fervent suppliant unto the Lord,

✠Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

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