

How Children Should Fast



Some say that children should not fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, and during the four Lenten Seasons until their third or even seventh year. Others say that children can be absolved to only white fast (milk, eggs, cheese) during these times. What of this is correct, and should children fast like grown-up Christians?

The answer to the above question (or questions) cannot be based on sacred Canons, because there is not a single Canon that explicitly prescribes how children should fast.

Children do not fast and do not have the need to fast like adult Christians. Because they still do not possess sins, passions and bad habits, which are quelled by fasting, for which the fast is commanded by God, and which the Holy Church has established and prescribed.

This does not mean that children are completely free of fasting, and that they do not have to fast at all.

How children will fast and how much, depends on the godliness and faith of their parents. And there really needs to be a lot of wisdom and reasoning, so that they do not overlook the physical and spiritual needs of their child.

It is also proper to put forward the question: until when is a "child" a child? Everyone knows that childhood has multiple stages of development through which the child passes. First of all, they are infants. Then comes an early childhood – a toddler (from the age of 2 to 3), then the child is a preschooler, then a pupil – elementary school age, and so on, until childhood proper and puberty.

For some parents, their child is a "child" until it serves the army, and even later. Obviously, the same principle in relation to fasting cannot be applied to all these stages of "childhood".

In resolving this issue, there are two extremes that parents, at least with us Serbs, often tend to gravitate towards. Either they will force a child from early childhood to strict fasting (as they themselves observe), or will "spare" them from fasting until they are "of age", and often even further. Both extremes are harmful to the child and destructive for their spiritual life.

In the first case, when a child is put into a forced and overbearing fast in early childhood, this can cause disgust and repulsion with regard to the fast.

On the other hand, when the little one does not get used to anything, and does not understand the difference between the days that are Lenten and not, it will be hard to ever get used to the fast and force themselves to restrain, which is also destructive. To avoid both of these extremes, is really a true art.

Many mothers bring two-month-old babies to Holy Communion, and then throughout their entire childhood. The child that morning, normally, is breastfed or given a bottle, which is not at all a barrier to their unity with the Lord in the Holy Mystery of Communion. And so, the child grows up in the Temple of God, physically raised at its mother's breast, and spiritually at the Holy Cup. From its first days it has been used to the ambience of the church, the flickering of the wax candles, the smell of incense, the priestly garments (and even the beard), and growing up as such, it begins feeling pleasant in the temple as in the house of its father.

Parents who care about the spiritual life of their children will not wait for the child to grow up completely and then start getting them used to the fast. They begin this gradually, from the age of three to four years of age. Not because the child in those early years needs to fast, in the sense that an adult does, but in order to get used to fasting. From early on they begin to differentiate that not all days are the same in terms of food, which will remain as a priceless treasure throughout their life. What is true about Lent, is also true for the Holy Mystery of Confession and Repentance.

According to the teachings of the Church, a child does not sin until the age of seven (i.e., it does not count as sin). In the case of our brethren, the Greeks and the Russians, parents take children from 4-5 years of age to the priest for "confession", not because of any particular sins, but to become adjusted to their holy and necessary Christian duty, without which, when they grow up, there can be no progress in spiritual life. And at the same time to establish trust and freedom in communicating with the priest – their spiritual father.

Indeed, those parents who strive to live by the Commandments of God, who strive for their personal salvation, under the guidance of an experienced spiritual father, are able to find the right expression and the golden mean with regard to their children, their fasting, Communion and the Holy Mystery of Repentance and Confession.

"Svetosavsko zvonce" (The Little Bell of Saint Sava)