

Saint Athanasius on Fasting

The following is the view on fasting of a most respected fourth century saint Athanasius the Great.

Athanasius encouraged Christians to practice moderate fasting throughout the forty days of Lent, excepting Saturdays and Sundays, and to intensify their fasts during Holy Week. Precisely what form these fasts took is not clear; Athanasius exhibited his characteristic flexibility on this matter, urging his followers to participate *'in fasts and vigils, as each person is able.'*

...Athanasius considered the Lenten fast essential preparation for Easter: by renouncing food, Christians were 'cleansed and purified... Fasting carried great symbolic importance for Athanasius personally: because he saw over-indulgent feasting as the peculiar characteristic of sinful human society, renunciation of food was the preeminent way by which a person could withdraw from the world.

For these reasons, it is no surprise that Athanasius devoted much of his first Festal Letter to the significance of fasting, taking as his theme the command in Joel: *'Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast'* (Joel 2: 15). Athanasius explains that fasting persons *'defile'* their fast by engaging in vicious behavior or *'sanctify'* it by practicing the virtues, especially humility. Indeed, true fasting is not a matter of the body, but of the soul, for it is really feasting on the virtues: *'Virtues and vices are the nourishments of the soul, and it can eat these two foods and incline to either of the two, according to its will.'* Here Athanasius invokes the traditional Christian theme of *'spiritual fasting'*, but for him there is no *'dichotomy'* between bodily and spiritual fasting. Rather, bodily fasting itself becomes an exercise for the human will, a discipline by which people turn their soul away from the food of the vices and toward that of the virtues. Such fasting both secures pardon for past sins and furthers its practitioners on the way up to heaven. Athanasius never connected the Lenten fast with the forty day fast of Jesus in the wilderness; rather, he offered fasting Christians biblical saints to imitate: Moses, Elijah, and Daniel. By practicing especially prolonged fasts, these saints, Athanasius said, were made worthy to receive revelations of higher things, which sustained them during their physical labors: *'Because the duration of the fast of these persons was amazing and the days lengthy, let no one fall hastily into unbelief; rather, one should believe and know that the contemplation of God and the Word from him suffice to nourish those who hear and replace all food for them.'* Fasting was designed to focus the soul on the divine nourishment of the virtues and the Word of God; it brought the body under the control of the soul's will. In this way, fasting promoted the general process of ascent to heaven that defined the Christian life...

Fasting provided other benefits as well, according to Athanasius. It promoted the stabilization of the body's distracting movements by reducing the level of energy within the body ('*silencing our fleshly desires*'). In turn, it gave persons strength to overcome their moral adversaries, namely the devil and his demons. Fasting enhanced meditation on the suffering and death of Christ and, in general, constituted an extreme and visible demonstration of one's faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Fasting thus touched on themes central to the Athanasian picture of the Christian life (as well as themes connected with fasting by other Christian authors). The body played a central role in the Christian's discipline, but one subordinated to the guiding moral role of the soul and its will. Athanasius, in fact, saw no value in fasting if one's ethical life was disordered: for example, it did no good if a person had wronged a neighbor; peace with the neighbor had to come first.

From:

Athanasius and Asceticism by David Brakke
pp 186-189

Life from Orthodox Wiki.

He was a bishop of Alexandria and major theological writer in the fourth century. He is also called Athanasius the Great. He was born in 298 and died on May 2, 373. His feast day in the Orthodox Church is January 18. Before reaching the age of 20, Athanasius wrote a treatise entitled *On the Incarnation*, affirming and explaining that Jesus Christ was both God and Man. In about 319, when Athanasius was a deacon, a presbyter named Arius began teaching that there was a time before God the Father begat Jesus when the latter did not exist. Athanasius responded that the Father's begetting of the Son, or uttering of the Word, was an eternal relationship between them, not an event that took place within time. Thus began catholic Christianity's fight against the heresy of Arianism. On May 9, 328, he succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria, becoming the 20th Patriarch of the Church of Alexandria, a position which he held for 45 years, 16 of which he spent in exile. As a result of rises and falls in Arianism's influence, he was banished from Alexandria only to be later restored on at least five separate occasions, perhaps as many as seven. Athanasius is also the first person to identify the same 27 books of the New Testament that are in use today; up until his Easter letter, various similar lists were in use. However, his list was the one that was eventually ratified by a series of synods and came to be universally recognized as the New Testament canon.

He also wrote a biography of Anthony the Great that later served as an inspiration to Christian monastics in both the East and the West.