

Article

Orthodox Fasting in a Postsecular Society: The Case of Contemporary Russia

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Received: 3 August 2018; Accepted: 5 September 2018; Published: 7 September 2018



Abstract: The article deals with the revival of fasting in Russia after a long period of its nearly full neglect. On the basis of electronic sources, such as web forums, question-and-answer services, streaming video channels, and other publications the author shows how the clergy and the laity together discuss, collectively test and evaluate diverse fasting practices. The discourse on fasting practices in Russia is polyphonic and highly personalized; even the clergy has no single authoritative position. It remains unclear, who should be responsible for fasting mitigation in case of illness, pregnancy, or other circumstances; people are exposed to many different opinions, what results in confusion and anxiety. The article shows that contemporary believers—including the clergy—are not ready to follow tradition blindly. The discussants are roughly divided into two groups: those supporting traditional rules (fasting from animal products), and those inventing their own practices (fasting from sweets, or switching to cheaper foods). Both groups are interested in rational, mundane arguments in support of their choice: the traditionalists emphasize that fasting from meat is “healthy”, or that Lenten food is “tastier”; their opponents point out that fish and seafood are more expensive than dairy products and poultry; therefore, no money can be saved for the destitute.

Keywords: Orthodox fast; fasting practices; Great Lent; new parishioners

1. Introduction¹

Orthodox Christianity is not just “doxa”, or a set of beliefs shared by believers; it implies “ortho-praxis”—practices of pious living either for individual followers, or for religious communities. Food—its preparation, consumption, and sharing—makes an important part of religious praxis. Ritual food became enormously significant for the Orthodox in the Soviet period: many people grew up without any other knowledge about Easter except that it is a day of making raisin cakes and colored eggs (Levkievskaja 2012, p. 67). Some foods outlasted the very tradition of fasting: the cheapest multicolor candies, known as “Lenten sugar”, were available at Soviet groceries even in the 1980s.

The topic of food and Orthodoxy is broader than fasting. I can mention such highly debated issues as: alimentary aspects of communion (dry wine for people with diabetes, grape juice for those allergic to alcohol, gluten-free bread, etc.); food restrictions not related to fasting (abstention from meat of strangled animals; not eating apples before the feast of the Transfiguration, or watermelon on the

¹ I would like to thank Professor Vera Shevzov (Smith College) not only for correcting my English writing, but also for her priceless comments that contributed a lot into my vision of the article.

day of the Beheading of the Forerunner, etc.); getting rid of leftovers of blessed foods (apple cores, egg shells); ritual foods for various occasions (frumenty, Paschal cake, “larks” for the day of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, etc.); consuming ritual foods of other faiths (halal, kosher, Prasad, etc.), and more.

The objective of my article is to demonstrate how the Orthodox community in Russia represented by both the clergy and the laity, discusses, tests and evaluates various fasting practices, either traditionally promoted by the Church, or invented anew. My methodology is based on analyzing Internet sources; additionally, I rely on first-hand observations during my participation in the life of a parish, which included discussions about everyday issues with believers. The article falls within the theoretical approach of “lived religion” (Orsi 1985), and implies no concepts like normativity and deviation.

Of these topics, fasting deserves special attention. It is an accessible method of bodily discipline that, according to the distinguished scholar of religion and culture Vladimir Leksin, lets the believers continuously demonstrate visible signs of their «otherness» in the public and family spaces they share with non-believers (Leksin 2008, p. 163). It is important to stress that the Orthodox in contemporary Russia are often lonely in their environment (Leksin 2008, p. 179; Komáromi 2010; Zabaev 2011—the situation has not changed in the last years); most of them originate from non-believing families. They became practicing Christians as a result of individual conversions (a massive wave of conversions took place in the beginning of the 1990s, as a result of the USSR’s ideological collapse)—elsewhere I call such people “the new parishioners” (Mitrofanova 2016). A statistically significant number of individual conversions provoked a debate about the return of religion into Russia (see: Furman and Kaariainen 2000); but religion definitely returned to a landscape that had been shaped by the processes of Soviet secularization, which allows scholars to envision Russia as a postsecular society (Uzlaner 2013). This situation has, at least, three important consequences:

First, regular believers (or, even clerics), born in average non-religious Soviet families (not in the families of the clergy or of religious dissidents) learned no domestic tradition of fasting. They have to acquire their knowledge about religious practices from books, or other diverse, and sometimes controversial, sources.

Second, both on-line and off-line discussions reveal serious problems with pastoral care. In theory, every believer is supposed to have a spiritual father (dukhovnik), whom s/he would consult in case of uncertainty (this function may be performed by experienced laymen, or by women—spiritual mothers). In the Soviet period, all institutionalized channels of spreading information about religious practices were closed (Levkievskaja 2012, p. 59). As a result, many believers in Russia have no individual spiritual advisers—at best, they try not to confess to a different priest every time. Even people claiming on the web that they have spiritual fathers admit being “ashamed” or “scared” of asking them.

Third, the demand for strict rules originates from below rather than being imposed by ecclesiastical authorities, who avoid establishing normative religious practices. It is normal for Orthodox practices to be heterogeneous and to remain uncoded. The result is that lay converts in Russia are simply left alone to deal with their uncertainties and frustrations.

Contemporary believers are highly individualized and have no one (like family, or spiritual fathers) to guide them through the strange land of historically accepted practices. Consequently, Internet has become the central source of knowledge not just for the new parishioners, but also for newly ordained clergy, who also are often equally uncertain about various practices. This has opened an opportunity to research the current discourse on fasting practices using electronic sources².

Contemporary Orthodox fasting—even outside of Russia—remains an underresearched topic. Most of Russian scholars describe historical practices (Voronina 2010; Voronina 2011; Levkievskaja 2012; Levkievskaja 2013; Veremenko 2015; Kolesnikova 2016), or literary reflections on fasting (Lysenko 2014; Iliinskaia 2016). There are publications on catering business during fasting periods (Dudnik 2009;

² There is a tendency that people prefer to pose questions on the web instead of consulting the professionals in real life also in the other spheres, like medicine, travelling, repair, etc.

Novikova and Galitskii 2013), and about the influence of fasting on athletic performance of students (Bogomolova 2009). Soviet and Russian ethnographers studied fasting only in the context of “folk culture” (a review of this literature may be found in: Voronina 2011, pp. 8–9). Some information on contemporary fasting is included in a seminal book by Voronina (2011). Research on Orthodox fasting outside Russia is mostly focused on its nutritional aspects (for example: Chrystalleni and Matalas 2010; Morcos et al. 2013), except very few sociological and anthropological publications (Quinton and Ciccazzo 2007; Komáromi 2010; Matalas et al. 2011).

Since the topic of Orthodox fasting is broad, I have established some limits to my research:

- My purpose is to reflect on the lived practices; and I have limited myself to forum discussions and individual Q&A sessions completed not earlier than within the last five years (no matter, if they started earlier). As for articles and videomaterials, I paid less attention to their date of publication, since they are permanently placed on-line and supposed to be read\watched continuously.
- My focus is exclusively on the Russian Orthodox Church, not counting other jurisdictions, or alternative communities that split from the mainstream Church.
- I attempted to limit myself as much as possible to the opinions of “enchurched” (on the concept of “enchurchment” see: Chesnokova 2005), or practicing believers, i.e., those taking communion on some regular basis (at least, according to their own words). I did not study broader fasting discourse that would include non-practicing Orthodox, agnostics, or nonbelievers. Exceptions are possible when such people enter into discussion with enchurched believers.
- My research is exclusively about the discourse on fasting practices for laypeople; it does not tackle the issues of monastic fasting, or fasting for clergy.
- The research is about food-related aspects of fasting; I analyze neither sexual abstention, nor fasting from sleep, nor so-called “spiritual fast” (abstaining from entertainment). The moral problems related to fasts are also beyond the scope of this article.
- My research is qualitative and is not based on quantitative data; it is not the task of this article to count how many people in Russia fast, or to identify their measure of fasting.

Discourse on Orthodox fasting practices (as well as practices themselves) in contemporary Russia is polyphonic; both clergy and laity actively express their concerns, opinions and experiences. Discussions are not limited to the laity seeking advice from clergy: more experienced lay men and women share experiences with the less experienced. To be aware of the positions of common believers I used popular web-forums, namely, Pravmir.ru, Azbuka.ru, and women-only forums Prikhozhanka.ru and Matushki.ru³. On these forums laypeople discuss fasting practices with other laypeople, priests, or wives of priests. Dialogs between priests and laypeople may be found at some newer sources, such as Internet live streams, and social media groups. I analyzed a popular streaming channel “Kiberpop” (Cyberpriest) managed by Archpriest Andrei Fedosov, and Batiushka-online (Father-online), a questions-and-answers group in the largest Russian social network Vkontakte, including its spin-off Matushka-online (Mother-online), where women ask questions to priests’ wives.

In addition, I studied several traditional questions-and-answers services, including “*Za sovetom k batiushke*” (To ask the Father) sector at the Pravmir.ru forum, and “*Voprosy sviashchenniku*” (Questions to a minister) sections at Pravoslavie.ru and Foma.ru. A video blog of Archpriest Dmitrii Smirnov was also useful. Such sources are less polyphonic, because laypeople here are not expected to address each other. More authoritative discourse may be found in articles published on major Orthodox web-sites. I have chosen Foma.ru, Pravlife.org, Pravmir.ru, Pravoslavie.ru, and Prichod.ru⁴. These articles also

³ All these forums are heavily premoderated to avoid flood and irrelevant posting.

⁴ Foma.ru is a web site of a glossy Orthodox magazine “Foma”; Orthodox portal Pravlife.org is officially supported by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which is autonomous within the Russian Orthodox Church; Pravmir.ru is a complex of Orthodox electronic media with multiple tasks; Prichod.ru is supported by the Administrative department of the Moscow Patriarchate.

usually offer no opportunity for discussion or commenting; they serve to inform the laity about correct practices. Finally, one of my sources is a culinary program “*Kukhnia batiushki Germogena*” (Father Germogen’s Kitchen) available on Youtube and managed by Hegumen Germogen (Ananiev), former Brother Cellarius of the St Daniil’s Monastery in Moscow.

Diversity of practices and voices are characteristic of Orthodox Christianity, which encompasses many lived traditions—regional, local, or sometimes even familial. This paper intends to demonstrate how in the situation of mass neophytism this polyphony may be confusing and even discouraging.

2. Fast Is Not a Diet

According to different estimations, various fast periods on the Orthodox calendar total from 180 to 200 days per year. Calendar fasts (as opposed to “occasional” fasts, such as, for instance, pilgrimage fasts) are different in their length, significance, and austerity (details may be found in: [Holy and Great Council 2016](#)). Great Lent is the longest and the most severe period of fasting. Most believers agree that Lent must be observed—with some degree of austerity. There are also three other long-term fasts (Apostles’ fast, Dormition fast, and Advent fast), one-day fasts, weekly fasts (Wednesday, Friday, and—sometimes—Monday), preparatory fast before communion (from one to three days), and Eucharistic fast (at least six hours of complete abstinence from food and water prior to the Divine Liturgy). The level of abstinence during fasts vary: there can be fasting from meat; from meat and other animal products (dairy and eggs); from animal products and fish; from animal products, fish, and seafood; from everything except cooked grain and veggies with/without oil; from everything except uncooked vegetables—so called *sukhoiadenie* (Greek: *xerophagia*), eating dry food ([Matalas et al. 2011](#), p. 191).

Most of the practicing Orthodox Christians in Russia do not question the necessity of fasting as such. There are, however, sporadic debates on some concrete practices. For example, the Apostles’ fast (also known as Peter and Paul’s fast) became a questionable issue ([Kuraev 2013](#); [Senchukova 2018](#)). Still, most laypeople are ready to fast at least to some degree.

The main printed source of fasting practices for the Russian Orthodox Church is the Typikon—a collection of liturgical rules that includes some dietary recommendations for the monastic. It dates back to the 6th century, but continues to be the only basis for nutritional restrictions; printed and electronic calendars available for the believers are still based on the Typikon (see: [Figure 1](#)). These restrictions are severe; and the mainstream opinion is that the Typikon is “an unreachable ideal” ([Skaballanovich 2004](#), p. 447; [Begiiian 2014](#); [Morozov 2015](#); [Fedosov 2017](#)). Everyday practice demonstrates that even monastics are not supposed to observe all recommendations from the Typikon. In this situation of uncertainty there is a strong demand for “exact”, or “correct”, fasting rules. “Is that correct?” is a recurring question found on the Orthodox web:

“Tell me how to observe the fast correctly, in terms of food and in terms of bodily cleanliness ... I searched on the Internet; there are different opinions; therefore, I am asking here, because you can tell me exactly how it should be done” ([Post v Sredu i Piatnitsu 2013](#));

“I would like to know the exact list of what should not be eaten for every day in the calendar” ([Post Dlia Mirian 2012](#));

“In fact, I am becoming sort of nervous. I am constantly afraid to eat something what is not allowed” ([Rozhdestvenskii Post 2008](#)).

This is a question asked via Foma.ru:

“My mother and I started Great Lent for the first time; we found the information what to eat and what not to eat on the Internet; but, unfortunately, it is all written differently in different places there” ([Efanov 2018b](#)).

Many people are critical of those dwelling too much on compositions of foods, looking for traces of powdered eggs and milk in bread and cookies, or demanding coconut milk for their coffee. But, in spite of ironic commentaries from priests and more “advanced” laypeople of being labeled Pharisees (Komarov 2017), accused of “straining at a gnat, and swallowing a camel” (Smirnov 2012), believers seem to be very concerned about eating something forbidden accidentally, just because of their poor knowledge:

“Ketchup, tomato paste. I have a suspicion that there is butter there, although it is not mentioned in its composition . . . Bread. I have no doubt about rye bread; it is approved. How about wheat bread then? I have counted it as forbidden during fasts, because there are eggs there” (Zapreshchennye Produkty 2015);

“In a large store a billboard in capital letters says: “Lenten mayonnaise”. I read its composition (trust, but check): “ . . . egg yolk . . . ” . . . ” (Chto “Postnee”? I Drugie Voprosy Pitaniia v Post 2008a).



Figure 1. Orthodox handheld calendar for April 2013 (the Great Lent) composed in accordance with the Typikon. Yellow drops crossed out mean fasting from oil; a “bowl” on April 27 indicates that dairy products and fish eggs are allowed (the Saturday of St Lazar).

Priests are not able to satisfy this social demand for strict rules. The Church has no firm fasting requirements adjusted to the needs of laypeople (the Typikon is intended for the monastic)⁵. It seems evident that the rules for laypeople should be less severe, but some pastors suggest that such regulations

⁵ There are ancient sources discussed as possible grounds for mitigated fasting rules: for example, the 6th century Nomocanon of St John Scholasticus.

are not needed (Pervozvanskii 2009; Morozov 2015). Every priest (as well as every experienced layperson) articulates one's personal position; opinions vary from calls to strict observance of the Typikon to drawing sharp distinctions between ideal and reality.

Generally, Priests tend to talk the believers out of severe food restrictions. Fr Andrei 'Cyberpriest' Fedosov denounces the attempts of laypeople to observe all rules from the Typikon. In a streaming video dedicated to Great Lent he stressed that "masses of people" make the same mistake: they start fasting even stricter than priests, but "this great deed, actually, is of no use" (Fedosov 2017). Archpriest Dmitrii Smirnov ridiculed people obsessed by food restrictions in his famous "sermon about chicken": "Most people think that it is God's will that one should not eat chicken during fast; that one should eat fish instead of chicken, or, better—octopuses. And if you eat an octopus, you please the Lord; while if you eat chicken, full of penicillin, you do not please the Lord. Because saving your soul depends on chicken" (Smirnov 2015a).

Participants of forums confirm that some priests openly forbid observing recommendations from the Typikon:

"Today even our priest has admitted that he does not observe this strict fasting without oil, because he has stomach problems. And he called to say "no" to fanaticism, and to consider one's health" (Kulinarnye Sovety v Pomoshch Postiashchimsia 2014a).

Another participant states regarding Great Lent practices:

"Our priest blesses only the first+the last week+Wednesday and Friday without oil. The remaining time—with oil" (Chto Mozhno, a Chto Nelzia v Post 2008a).

Other clergy, such as hieromonk Feodorit (Senchukov), a medical doctor, speak in favor of strict observance. Although suffering from diabetes, he claims that he only broke fast twice in his life (meaning, after baptism); on both occasions he experienced unpleasant consequences. Being yet a layman, he ate a chicken breast on a plane: "I was on a plane; there was a breast; well, I am travelling . . . I felt incredibly bad later. Not because of the chicken, but because of breaking the fast" (Senchukov and Desnitskii 2018). Archpriest Dmitrii Smirnov, despite his above-cited chicken sermon, in another video recommends fasting strictly: "It is very healthy. Many people fast in accordance with the Typikon. I have been fasting for forty-five years and feel absolutely no difficulties" (Smirnov 2015b). Those suggesting strict fasting often admit that this would require a non-standard way of life—living in a monastery or in a rural community—which is impractical for most contemporary Russian city dwellers, who work full time and have to eat at work.

"I have no spiritual father, and earlier different priest were giving me blessing for mitigating fast "without problems". But this time I had approached a recently ordained one, and he told me that I was asking for mitigation due to deceitfulness of my flesh, and that he did not intend to have this sin on his soul" (Kak Pravilno Provesti Nachalo Velikogo Posta 2009).

As a result, many people feel confused:

"One of our priests says that one should not fast on Saturdays . . . ; another one says that one should; Archpriest Dmitrii Smirnov—that only meat should be fasted from on Saturday. To whom shall I listen?" (Skolko Dolzhno byt Postnykh Dnei v Godu 2013);

«The opinions of the clergy on this issue are diverse. Some of them believe that the Typikon is obligatory for everyone: for the monastic, and for the laity. Some support the opposite viewpoint, that the rules of the Typikon are impractical for most people and that there is no need for the laity to observe them . . . How can an average person figure out which viewpoint is correct, i.e., fulfilling God's will? Advice like «ask your spiritual father» do not work. It is like casting lots: one priest tells you one thing; another priest says something else. But it is your afterlife destiny that is on the scales» (Post Ne po Tipikonu—Spasenie ili Pogibel 2012).

In fact, priests themselves are sometimes confused. Most of them can offer nothing but their individual experiences. Fasting has always been part of living tradition learned not from books, but from life in a Christian family, or in a Christian community. In contemporary Russia, such experience is inaccessible for most people. Still, an alternative to abstinence from food can be found in books: the idea that “fast is not a diet”, and that its main purpose is spiritual (Berkhin 2016; Legoida 2011; Efanov and Archpriest 2018d). According to the Church Fathers, fast is a “spiritual exercise” allowing to reach higher levels in the process of one’s deification (*theosis*). However, it remains unclear what one should do to fast if not just abstain from specific foods. There are many answers provided by all participants in the ongoing debate; unfortunately, most of these answers are not fully satisfying even for those who articulate them.

Fasting includes abstention from usual entertainment, such as watching movies and TV, dancing, or reading pulp fiction. What looks strange is that some commentators profess “spiritual fasting” in the form of doing something—more praying, more church attendance, even more charity. Fr Aleksandr Yelchaninov writes: “Fast is a period of spiritual effort. If we are not able to give our whole lives to God, let us fully dedicate at least the period of fasts to Him—let us strengthen prayers; extend charity; tame passions; let us make peace with enemies” (Pravoslavie.ru 2014). Fr Andrei “Cyberpriest” Fedosov explains that fasting is “abstaining first of all from sin, from judgment, from idle talks, from idleness in general; to pay more attention to one’s soul, to church service, to prayer; to participate actively in the sacraments of the Church, to read Scripture” (Fedosov 2017).

The reason for presenting more liturgical participation and praying as variations of fasting is probably that Great Lent is the only period when liturgical services in the Orthodox Church change their quality. This, indeed, suggests not just abstention from food, but attending multiple and specific church services. The other long-term fasts imply no liturgical changes, and are not associated with “praying more”. Some authors even propose doing more charity, or being particularly virtuous during fasts. Archpriest Maksim Pervozvanskii, for example, theorizes that those who cannot observe fasting rules should try “to compensate it by abstaining from something what one loves, or by acts of charity” (Pervozvanskii 2009).

This idea of “compensating” for eating animal products through doing more charity is often doubted: Christians are expected to do charity constantly (as well as to pray and to take communion). It is not fasting, but normal Christian life. Many believers question this idea of spiritual “effort” within restricted time periods (Meshcherinov and Smirnova 2011; Zaitsev 2013). Similar opinions are frequently expressed on forums:

“Christians should avoid this sort of mobilization only for fasting time ... Christians should always be attentive to themselves not to become sporadic Orthodox Christians” (Dieta po Ustavu 2018).

A dialog from Matushki.ru forum:

“During fast it is not allowed to be annoyed, to offend your neighbors” (Chto Mozhno, a Chto Nelzia v Post 2008b).—“It is not allowed also beyond fast” (Chto Mozhno, a Chto Nelzia v Post 2008c).

For most people fasting from food is not something to be substituted, or compensated for, by a temporarily “intensified” Christian life. Fasting means temporary abstention from something that is not forbidden in other periods of time. Here, the debate returns to its beginning—to the dietary side of fasting.

3. Measure of Fasting

The issue of measure has at least two dimensions. One of them concerns the annual number of fasting periods appropriate for an average layperson. Very few people (if any) question the necessity of Great Lent and the Eucharistic fast. What is questioned is whether one should fast on Sunday before

communion, or three days prior to communion; whether the other long fasts, apart from Great Lent, are obligatory, etc. But, since this article is more about food than about fasting in general, I would like to focus on the second dimension—on the issue of fasting mitigation.

It is not clear who has the right to mitigate the demands of the Typikon and under what circumstances. This book contains no explanations in this regard. As usual, the discourse surrounding this issue is polyphonic. One position is that either strict fasting, or mitigation of fasting for laypeople, requires a spiritual father's approval. Prichod.ru informs readers that «for a layperson the issue of fasting can be relatively easily resolved—he/she needs to ask a spiritual father for advice or blessing» (Tarabrin 2015). On the forum of Pravmir.ru a laywoman expresses her bewilderment by an interview with a Romanian hieromonk Kleopa (Ilie), in which he prescribes strict food restrictions (nothing but uncooked fruits and vegetables before communion (Ilie 2013). Some Fr Vladimir answers that «you should have your own spiritual father. It is better not to follow the advice of monastic ascetics. Married priests are more suitable for laypeople» (Forum.pravmir.ru 2014). Answering whether a pastoral blessing is needed to mitigate fasting for a sick person, he firmly states: «Yes, ask your priest to bless the mitigation» (Forum.pravmir.ru 2013). Fr Grigorii at the same forum tells a woman that her health suffered because she had fasted while being sick: «you dared to fast on your own, without blessing, and this was the result of your non-obedience» (Forum.pravmir.ru 2012).

Consulting a spiritual father is the most frequent advice laypeople give to other laypeople: «Measure of fasting should necessarily be discussed with a priest» (Postnye Retsepty 2010); «It is better to discuss the level of austerity of fast with a spiritual father. I have done it once. Once and forever. If I doubt, I will ask my spiritual father» (Vashe Menu v Post 2014a).

There are dissenting voices of people preferring to be responsible for their own fasting:

“It is harmful for women to fast from dairy products, especially for the elderly ones—osteoporoses. That this why I will never ask for blessing dairy products—if I have no blessing, I still will [eat it]; it is much worse a sin, IMHO, but I am not an enemy to my bones” (Vegetarianstvo i Pravoslavnyi Post 2018b);

“Do not rely on priests. If you meet a specifically fast-loving one, look for another one, for one who understands that there are different diseases in the world, and that they require different diets and different regimes” (Postnyi Stol na Novyi God 2013).

The voice of the clergy is equally polyphonic. Hegumen Nektarii (Morozov) says that blessing is «not necessary» to start fasting (Morozov 2009); the same position is articulated by Hegumen Piotr Meshcherinov: «every person should define one's own measure of fast for oneself» (Meshcherinov and Smirnova 2011). «Father-online» Aleksandr Kuzmin recommends to a group member: «Regulate your fast yourself because you are a layman ... your conscience is your main judge» (Batiushka-online 2018). These positions seem not to depend on specific «liberalism» of a particular priest; rather, they reflect general uncertainty about what laypeople should do.

Even the same priest may provide different recommendations. For example, Archpriest Andrei Efanov states to one reader (asking what he/she can eat at a birthday party during Great Lent) that «observing the Lent, and measure of fasting is your private business and your responsibility to yourself and to the Lord» (Efanov 2018a); to another reader (asking whether laypeople should fast from oil) he responds that «in such cases we should act only in accordance with a spiritual father's advice» (Efanov 2018c). Fr Andrei “Cyberpriest” Fedosov tells one viewer that laypeople should define their measure of fasting themselves, but immediately recommends to two other viewers suffering from some illnesses to ask for pastoral blessing to mitigate fasting (Fedosov 2017). This evident ambiguity in response demonstrates that no one, in fact, knows the correct solution, if any. Pointing to the diverse nature of Orthodoxy here would be useless, because the inquirers are evidently not prepared to make decisions on their own.

Another major issue with the topic of fasting concerns identifying the reasons for significant relief from, or even full abolishment of, fasting. Clergy and laity are normally ready to meet

specific nutritional demands of some groups: sick people, pregnant women, adolescents, sportsmen, people doing hard physical jobs, travelers, etc. Sickness (as well as pregnancy) is the most widely accepted reason for legitimate mitigation of fasting rules; this opinion is even confirmed—with regard to Eucharistic fast—by an official document adopted by the Russian Orthodox Church (Patriarchia.ru 2015). Most priests agree that taking a medication does not mean breaking fast, because medicaments are not food ([Kozlov 2008](#); [Smirnov 2015b](#)). There is also a popular idea that a medically prescribed diet should be equated with fasting ([Efanov and Archpriest 2018d](#)). Some people suggest that medical doctors, not spiritual fathers, should define the measure of fasting:

«A priest is not a doctor; he is not able to take individual peculiarities into account. There are probably doctors among parishioners. In those churches where they are present, why not involve them in working out fasting recommendations for particular parishioners; the priest will only need to bless a professional physician's recommendation» ([Post Ne po Tipikonu—Spasenie ili Pogibel 2015](#)).

Some priests are medical doctors, too. And their positions vary from insisting that fasts are actually good for people with diabetes and pancreatitis ([Potupchik 2015](#)) to admitting that they rely on the doctor-in-charge to answer questions regarding fasting mitigation rather than providing their own opinion ([Tarabrin 2015](#)).

Archpriest Vladimir Vigilianskii maintains that “I often permit mitigations due to medical reasons ... And I do not know priests who would tell a sick person: no, you better die, but continue fasting” ([Prichod.ru](#) 2018). But the situation is not that simple; numerous pious stories on the web demonstrate a contrasting approach. For example, a story about St John of Kronstadt on the official web-site of the convent that houses his relics (the author is a keeper of his cassock) states: «It happened once that John of Kronstadt fell seriously ill; doctors recommended that Fr. John break the fast, and he answered—«I can not without my mother's blessing». A telegram was sent to Feodora Vlasievna, in whose answer we can observe the firmness of this simple woman's faith: «Better to die than to break a fast» ([Pavlova 2015](#)). Such stories from the past can be lethal for believers who face serious health problems.

Such conflicting messages provoke confusion and anxiety. Although fasting mitigation for those who are ill seems evident, sick people unable to observe the prescriptions of the Typikon often think of themselves as of sinners. Fr Andrei “Cyberpriest” Fedosov recommends them “to repent” ([Fedosov 2017](#)). It remains unclear, what should they repent of? Of having diabetes, or of being allergic? In this case polyphony does not contribute into finding consensus on a sensitive issue. As a result, some sick people try to observe strict fasting rules, destroying their health even more. It is not uncommon that even people without medically diagnosed diseases “overfast” and faint in public.

Fraternal love is the second most discussed reason for fasting mitigation. As I mentioned above, most believers in Russia live among non-believers—their spouses, children, or parents. Observing fasts often leads to tensions within families ([Leksin 2008](#), p. 180). For example, women are expected to cook for the family; it is hard for them to observe fasting rules because they need to prepare two sets of meals. Another common situation in Russia is adult children living with parents—they cannot fast properly since they often do not cook for themselves:

«My second [problem] is my mom. She mostly cooks because I work and study entire days and evenings. She becomes very upset when I ask her to cook something for fasting; we start quarreling because of it. I have decided that it is better to preserve peace in the family, and to eat what is forbidden, than to fast and to hurt my mom. For all these reasons, I did not take communion for a long time; I was afraid. Yesterday I went to confession; I thought I would ask our priest if I can commune, but then I did not ask because I was embarrassed» ([Snova Voprosy o Prichashchenii i Poste 2012](#)).

Not just ordinary family life engenders problems; there are also visits and celebrating holidays together with those who do not fast:

«My brother has birthday tomorrow; he does not fast, and I am going to eat what I am given—not to offend the host, because this would be a bigger sin than me eating meat dishes» (Prazdnichnyi Postnyi Salat “Rybnyi Tort” 2012a).

New Year celebration represents the most important problem for the Orthodox in Russia. In the post-war Soviet Union this only non-ideological national holiday became a beloved family event. Its food traditions suppose eating meat dishes, such as oven-baked duck, or potato salad with chicken/bologna/meat, and with mayonnaise (known as “Olivier” salad). Unfortunately, since the Russian Orthodox Church lives according to the Julian calendar, the civic New Year always falls on the last week of Advent fast. Most laypeople (as well as priests born in average Soviet families) share warm childhood memories about the New Year, and its coincidence with fast constitutes a problem for them.

Here, again, opinions are multiple and diverse. There are priests and laypeople who strictly oppose the idea that the New Year is an excuse for breaking fast (Gumerov 2010; Shishkin 2011; Avdiugin 2016). Sometimes such people were raised in religious families that did not celebrate New Year’s even in the Soviet past; sometimes it is their understanding of piety, or their wish to be different. Most believers, however, are not ready to sacrifice the best of their childhood. One of the commentators to an anti-New Year article by Fr Pavel Gumerov writes (this article—unlike many other, dedicated to «more serious» topics—attracted a lot of commentaries):

«I was born in 1952. We all lived together—my grandmother, grandfather (my father’s parents), mom, dad and sister, who was born in 1959. For the New Year we always decorated a tree. < . . . > Unfortunately, none of us was enshrined, but love always kept us warm. On the eve of the New Year, the scent of pies always filled the flat. How can one forget all this? How can one call all this wrong?» (Gumerov 2010, commentary by Elena, 24 December 2010).

On January 1st and 2nd noticeably more people queue at churches to repent of breaking Advent fast. Many believers admit that they sometimes decline fasting for the New Year celebrations:

«It is better not to decline if your whole family is enshrined; if you are alone, it is more difficult. I constantly decline [fasting]; on the New Year day I eat smoked fish, caviar in tartlets, salad made of cod’s liver. < . . . > This is why I support transition to the European calendar . . . » (Otkloniaetes Li Vy ot Posta v Novyi God 2013a);

“As for the New Year. I have no wish to play a devotee among my not enshrined relatives. And it is not right. < . . . > If someone is offended that I have not tried what had been cooked of forbidden foods—I will try a bit, not to be offensive” (Otkloniaetes Li Vy ot Posta v Novyi God 2013b).

A significant number of priests (especially those who share the same childhood memories) is ready to approve fasting mitigation—if not complete abolishment—for the New Year as “the lesser evil” in the name of not being offensive and arrogant (Meshcherinov and Smirnova 2011; Iliachenko and Danilova 2012; Barinova 2015; Rovinskii 2017). This Q&A section is representative (Foma.ru 2017):

Marina (Q): «I have been baptized recently. This Advent fast is my first; I like fasting. But one question bothers me: what to do with the New Year? I am the only one observing fast from the whole family. My mom, dad, and grandmother are non-believers. The New Year was always a family event for us: we gathered around a festive table, wishing happiness to each other. And now I do not know what to do. I do not want to shout «Hurray!» while bells are pealing, and to eat salad with bologna. But even more I do not want to offend my dear people by my abstention».

Archpriest Sergii Arkhipov (A): «According to the common opinion of all Orthodox saints, without exception, love is higher than fasting. And, of course, God is not offended, if, for the

sake of peace in the family, a believer, contrary to one's wish to fast, would celebrate with the relatives, while trying to observe at least some fasting rules, or even eating some spoons of bologna salad at the New Year table».

At the moment resolving the New Year problem looks impossible: the Church, to the best of my knowledge, does not intend to change to the Gregorian calendar. Another opportunity would be some officially approved practice of mitigating fast for the New Year. Some Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States offer dispensation to eat turkey on Thanksgiving even though the holiday often falls on during the Advent fast (Quinton and Ciccazzo 2007, p. 481). A similar decision could have been found for Russia's New Year.

The issue of fasting measure exemplifies that polyphony and discussion are not necessarily better than having one authoritative opinion. Many people, unable to fast in accordance with the Typikon due to being sick, or not wishing to offend their family members, think of themselves as great sinners, and, in fact, deny themselves full participation in the liturgical life (they do not go to Communion because of alleged sins). Obviously, individual clergymen cannot help them, especially when people are so often "embarrassed", or "afraid" of asking. Here, indeed, an ecclesiastical document regulating at least some aspects of fasting for laypeople would be beneficial.

4. Lenten Cuisine

Mitigation does not mean that fast is canceled. And here the question of what to eat and what to fast from appears again. Participants of debates may be roughly divided into two groups: those insisting on the "traditional" rules of fasting, as they had been formulated by the Church in the earlier centuries (i.e., fasting from animal products), and those inventing new rules, often having little ground in the ecclesiastical tradition. Both groups try to find rational arguments in support of the practices they prefer.

Sometimes the first group simply refers to the Tradition of the Church, providing no additional explanations. It seems to be more characteristic of the clergy. For example, this argument is articulated by His Beatitude Onufrii, the Metropolitan of Kiev and All Ukraine: "observing fast is an expression of our obedience to God and His Holy Church" (Onufrii, Metropolitan of Kiev and all Ukraine 2018), or by Hegumen Nektarii (Morozov): "We are not talking about self-torture, but about obedience before an ecclesiastical institution that at first glance appears incomprehensible, illogical and outdated. (Morozov 2009). Laypeople also express similar visions—a forum participant simply states: "We fast because God has established it. That's all!" (Tseli Posta 2014).

Still, most people demonstrate that they are not ready just to follow the tradition blindly, since they only recently discovered this tradition, it is not a tradition inherited from their family or their community. They continue looking for lengthier and more rational explanations. For a pre-modern rural society with its limited choice of foods fasting was not a subject for discussions. Now fasting practices are challenged by an endless variety of nutritional options and, what is also important, by a growing food awareness. Contemporary believers—even the traditionalists—see fasting as something that needs to be explained. They ask for strict rules, but need these rules to be intelligible and rational. New topics sometimes undermine the position of the traditionalists, and sometimes enforce their arguments. As a result, the border between the traditional and the non-traditional approaches to fasting is often blurred. Some people fast in accordance with the Typikon, but for reasons they themselves invented. Others, on the contrary, invent new fasting schemes in order to preserve "the spirit of fasting" as they understand it.

The mainstream ecclesiastical rational argument in favor of not eating animal products is that fasting is a means to fight passions (Meshcherinov and Smirnova 2011; Morozov 2011; Steniaev 2015; Popov 2016). Passions here are defined as so-called passions of the flesh—lust, gluttony, drunkenness, anger and its derivatives: revenge, swearing, etc. (Popov 2016). Eating as such is not sinful; gluttony—the abuse of eating—is considered sinful. Meat and other animal products are seen as "heavy", substantial foods able to incite passions. In the past, even spices—for the same reason—were considered something to fast from, but now this recommendation has become obsolete.

Since abstaining from animal products is praised by ascetics of different faiths, this explanation sounds rational, and is accepted by believers: «For me fast is an activization of military action against Satan and his passions» (Tseli Posta 2011); «during fast the main thing is not fighting meat/milk/sweets, or overweight . . . The main thing is fighting one's passions, and repenting.» (Dieta po Ustavu 2018). Some discussants see fasting as a practice of making people «sick» in order to mortify the flesh:

«Fast has a purpose other than diet. When we read about mortification of the flesh, it is, in other words, weakening your health!» (O Polze Posta Dlia Telesnogo Zdorovia 2013b); «For what has bodily fasting—abstaining from food—been established? To mortify the flesh, the desires of the flesh. Meat is, in this regard—“inflaming” . . . » (Chto “Postnee”? I Drugie Voprosy Pitaniia v Post 2008b).

Sometimes, forum participants openly stress that fasting is supposed to weaken sexual desires: “It is physiologically grounded, for animal protein is needed to form sex hormones. And food restrictions assist us in abstaining from marital relations” (O Polze Posta Dlia Telesnogo Zdorovia 2013a). Mainstream clerical commentators are mostly evasive and prefer talking about “passions” in general.

An objection may arise that Christians are expected to fight their passions continuously, not only during fasting periods. But there is a logical explanation that may be easily found in the mainstream ecclesiastical discourse. One of the best formulations was given by Fr Dmitrii Smirnov: “Abstinence serves to train your will, so that you can resist temptations. And your fast is your training ground. < . . . > Initially you abstain from food, then you abstain in acts, then you abstain in words, then you abstain in thoughts, then you abstain in feelings. < . . . > But you should always keep the final goal in mind.” (Smirnov 2012). This metaphor of training ground for fighting our passions is popular and widely exploited by the mainstream discourse (see: Legoida 2011); it can be found in monastic literature of the past, as well as in the letters of the Apostle Paul⁶.

Besides fighting passions of the flesh, in the current fasting discourse there are at least three other rational arguments in support of fasting from animal products.

One of them represents fast as a healthy way of life, a means to “purify” one's body. Here the apology of traditional fasting has a lot in common with vegetarianism. This argument represents meat as “harmful”, rather than “exciting passions”, while substituting bodily purity for spiritual purity. Hegumen Anatolii Berestov, a medical doctor, wrote in his book *Sin, Disease, and Healing*: “Consuming too much meat causes fermentation processes, which provoke intensive proliferation of conditionally pathogenic (“harmful”) micro flora” (Berestov 2000). These invectives against meat as such are alien to Orthodox Christianity, where disdaining meat has always been a ground for excommunication (Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia 2004); but this sort of argumentation is relatively popular. Contrary to the above-mentioned “fast is not a diet” principle, clerics and laypeople promote fast as an advanced, healing diet (Mamontov 2013). Recipes often end with claims that food prepared this way is healthy and/or able to clean your body of “waste” (see: Voronina 2011, pp. 314–17). For example, a forum participant concludes her recipe of a Lenten oatmeal dish with: “This dish absorbs waste very well and contributes to its extraction from the body” (Postnye Retsepty 2008). Another participant states categorically that “Actually, from the viewpoint of health, the less animal fats, the better. (And better to exclude them totally, if possible).” (Vsem Poklonnikam Pravilnogo Pitania Posviashchaestia 2015). Contrary to the earlier discussed understanding of fast as mortification of the flesh, many believers declare that fasting makes one's flesh feel better: «By the way, observing fast can heal many of the sick» (Post Ne po Tipikonu—Spasenie ili Pogibel 2013).

Striving for healthy food sometimes makes animal\plant distinction unimportant. Tatiana Voronova reports, for instance, that during fasting periods people switch to “herbal teas” in order to improve health (Voronina 2011, p. 303), although black tea is not an animal product.

⁶ I am especially grateful to Professor Shevzov for the reminder.

Pravlife.org even published an article suggesting making fasts healthier by abstaining from elevators, or by using the fasting period to schedule an appointment with a dentist (Vykhovanets 2018). At the same time, other priests and laymen articulate that fasting is not intended to make one healthy. Archpriest Andrei Ovchinnikov openly admits that “our talks about health, which improves because of fasting—it is for the beginners, to attract them somehow” (Popov 2016). A second argument in favor of avoiding animal products, including fish, that also resembles vegetarianism, is that doing so prevents animal cruelty: “The thought that at least fifty days no one is being killed for me keeps me warm. And so far I am fasting easily and joyfully with this thought” (Vegetarianstvo i Pravoslavnyi Post 2018b). Such explanations are rare, even exotic, since they evidently contradict the established ecclesiastical position on eating meat. Although presented as arguments in support of traditional fasting, they are dubious. Orthodox fasting is not Veganism; fish—unlike milk and eggs—is appropriate Lenten food. Thus, protecting animals may easily become an argument against traditional fasting, and in support of eating dairy products and unfertilized eggs. The argument discussed below is even more ambiguous.

Supporters of traditional fasting often stress that Lenten food is not just healthy; it is also tasty, much better than “normal” dishes. Fr Germogen accompanies his recipe of Lenten dough with a remark that “This dough turns out so gentle and tasty that many of my acquaintances make in not only during fast, but on holydays as well” (Neofit Studio 2011). This proclamation of tastiness is typical of most recipes available on the web and elsewhere (see Figure 2). Some people see no problem in eating tasty Lenten food: “When my mom rebukes me for fasting, I tell her that Lenten food is better than on regular days!” (Postnyi Stol na Novyi God 2009); “Today I had to go to a café; I ate a squash filled with rice with fried carrots, onion, and mushrooms—I would never have thought that it would be so tasty” (Velikii Post. Nashe Menu Na Zavtra 2016a).



Figure 2. “Lenten Tasty!”. Tray liner, advertizing Lenten offers.

There are also believers who feel that eating tasty food during fasts signifies a particular variation of the vice of gluttony—gourmandizing, or wishing to eat delicious food. In their opinion, tasty Lenten dishes contradict not the letter, but the spirit of fasting: “Well, I am making a fully Lenten dish for myself—buckwheat with mushrooms! And I really like it more than

meat! And what happens—is it not fasting already?” (Ponuzhdenie Sebia Khrista Radi 2012); “... during fast we eat extraordinarily many tasteful things. < ... > May this be self-deception?” (Chto “Postnee”? I Drugie Voprosy Pitaniia v Post 2009a).

Such hesitation and anxiety seem to be unknown to the previous generations: they invented many ways to make Lenten food pleasant. But for the post-Soviet “new parishioners” the issue suddenly became problematized. Evidently, good quality Lenten food can be used both as an argument in favor of traditional fasting, and against it; in the latter case, believers can turn to untraditional practices they invent in the process of reflecting on how they fast.

A common form of alternative fasting (I am discussing only food-related forms) is depriving oneself of tasty foods, or from the foods one loves, no matter, whether these foods are animal products, or not. People suggest fasting from chocolate, sweets, coffee, etc. This method of fasting is also seen as a solution for those whose medically prescribed diets require eating non-lenten foods, or for those dependant on some foods, or just for those who see no meaning in traditional fasting:

«Nowadays I see some interesting variations of fasting. For example, an unhealthy person < ... > to abstain during fast chose fasting from coffee (because he is heavily dependent on it), television, and social media» (Chto “Postnee”? I Drugie Voprosy Pitaniia v Post 2018);

“I always thought that fasting means, first of all, abstaining from what is ... desired and tasty, chocolate-marmalade” (Postnye Bliuda v Kroshke-Kartoshke 2018);

“One can eat not the favorite yoghurts, but cottage cheese. Not tasty, but healthy” (Kulinarnye Sovety v Pomoshch Postiashchimsia 2014b).

«I have defined fast for myself as abstaining from everything I like. For example, I like drinking coffee. I like chocolate. So, during the fast I abstain from all this. Is this correct?» (Kak Pravilno Pitatsia v Velikii Post 2014);

«Girls, I understand fasting as rejecting everything tasty, sweet (even Lenten)» (Chto “Postnee”? I Drugie Voprosy Pitaniia v Post 2008c).

This practice seems to be widespread, because it seems rational. However, it evidently has nothing to do with clear historical principles of Orthodox fasting. Collections of Lenten recipes from the past centuries (18th–19th) include sweet dishes, pies, cakes, or homemade candies. Quinton and Ciccazzo suggest that this vision of fasting, observed also in the Orthodox parishes of North America, emerged under the influence of a Roman Catholic custom to “give up” something (Quinton and Ciccazzo 2007, p. 485). I think that in Russia Catholic influences could have played a similar role. At the same time, there is historical evidence that fasting from sweets was not uncommon in prerevolutionary Russia (Kolesnikova 2016, p. 96), and that this type of abstention might date back to the traditions of the Old Believers, some of whom abstained from white sugar completely.

The position of the clergy is that giving up treats, like sweets, or chocolate, is fasting for children (or neophytes). In response to a question about fasting from sweets, Fr Dmitrii Smirnov stressed that this sort of abstention is appropriate only as the first step for training one’s will, but that the Typikon prescribes fasting from animal foods, not from anything else (Smirnov 2012). Most priests approve eating no-milk chocolate during fasts (see, for example: Iliachenko 2018).

The discussion about tasty Lenten food demonstrates that many believers are not willing to accept the established ascetic practice of fasting from animal products. There is also a spin-off of this discussion: whether or not it is allowed to eat Lenten surrogates and processed foods (mayonnaise without eggs, margarine, soy meat, soy milk, tofu, etc.). My impression is that most believers use the surrogates extensively. People exchange numerous recipes based on substituting Lenten surrogates for common ingredients, in particular, recipes of salads with Lenten mayo (see: Komáromi 2010). Salads dressed with mayonnaise are popular in Russia as a holiday treat; it is no surprise that there

are whole threads of discussions dedicated specifically to Lenten mayonnaise (including recipes of a homemade one). Father Germogen uses no-eggs mayonnaise and the like foods in his culinary show. While the majority consumes Lenten processed foods, some discussants express concerns about these products being harmful, full of «chemicals», or about the hypocrisy of eating surrogates:

«Many of our relatives-neighbors like eating soy meat-sausage-frankfurters during fasts. I do not understand it. If you want a sausage—you better go and buy a normal one. Why would one deceive oneself?» ([Chto “Postnee”? I Drugie Voprosy Pitaniia v Post 2009b](#));

«As if we want to outwit ourselves; like: let me eat meat during fast, what’s the problem, it’s soy» ([Chto Mozhno, a Chto Nelzia v Post 2008d](#));

«As for me, the priest has forbidden to use commercial «Lenten mayonnaise» during Lent. He said, it is the same as «Lenten sausage» . . . » ([Velikii Post. Nashe Menu Na Zavtra 2016b](#));

«All these Lenten sweets and mayonnaises seem like Pharisaism» ([Prazdnichnyi Postnyi Salat “Rybnyi Tort” 2012b](#)).

Russians of the previous centuries did not hesitate to use homemade substitutes, such as poppy seed oil, or almond milk ([Voronina 2011](#), p. 135), although, these were, or course, not commercially produced processed foods. Priests, supporting the traditional practice of fasting, do not object using Lenten surrogates. Fr Dmitrii Smirnov, answering this question, stresses that soy meat does not impact on human body like real meat, and that eating substitutes is fine, unless doing so represents the vice of gourmandizing ([Smirnov 2012](#)). Fr Andrei “Cyberpriest” Fedosov is of the same opinion ([Fedosov 2017](#)).

Another popular set of arguments against traditional fasting is based on a presumption that Lenten food, like fish and seafood, is more expensive than dairy products and poultry. Many people, including the clergy, refer to St John Chrysostom’s words that real fasting presupposes saving money on food to give to the poor ([Meshcherinov and Smirnova 2011](#); [Kuraev 2013](#); [Uminskii and Golovko 2013](#))⁷. Some people also lament that making Lenten dishes is time consuming; as a result, no spare time is left for charity work or prayer. On this ground, some discussants deny that eating expensive, or hard-to-make Lenten foods is genuine fasting:

“One can allegedly fast with super-expensive squids and other seafood. But what is fast, then? The ancient monastic fasted; and the money they saved during fasts was given to the poor” ([Mozhno li Est Moreprodukty v Vel.post 2009](#));

“If during fast one spends money on seafood, but does not donate to the church, does not share one’s food with the destitute, what is the meaning of such fasting (I mean, while consuming Lenten seafood)” ([Moreprodukty 2012](#));

“If one recalls Chrysostom’s quotation about fasting . . . nowadays imported chicken thighs and liver sausage would be considered Lenten food rather than exotic fruit, non-fish seafood and the other expensive delicacies, with which Christians please themselves during fasts” ([Chto “Postnee”? I Drugie Voprosy Pitaniia v Post 2010](#));

“Lenten delicacies take significantly more time (often also more effort and more money) than a package of cottage cheese or scrambled eggs” ([Vegetarianstvo i Pravoslavnyi Post 2018a](#));

“I remember a priest saying the following (imprecise quotation): “Calculate the cost of your normal lunch, then the cost of the Lenten one, and give the difference to the poor”, i.e., ideally fasting should “economize” money” ([Vashe Menu v Post 2014b](#)).

⁷ I failed to identify the primary source for this quotation; but cross-references to it are abundant.

Saving money or time during fasts for more important things is not a requirement. This idea may be found in the ecclesiastical literature as advice (Georgii, *Mitropolitan of Nizhnii Novgorod and Arzamas* 2012, p. 20). Fr Andrei “Cyberpriest” Fedosov, answering someone’s question emphasizes that there is no such a rule: “it is welcome, it is pious if one does like this; but it is not obligatory” (Fedosov 2017). However, this argument sounds rational for contemporary believers who observe the social activism of Christian organizations outside of Russia, which seems—especially for people born in a socialist paternalist state—more important than prayer and/or fasting.

5. Conclusions

The postsecular situation in contemporary Russia may be described in terms of interrupted channels that used to transmit fasting habits from one generation to the next. Most Orthodox believers are relatively recent converts (“new parishioners”), and have no family patterns to follow. Moreover, their previous family experience often contradicts the new knowledge about religious practices (the New Year—Advent fast dilemma). Religion, especially its practical side, is a strange land for them, which they need guidance to navigate. The absence of family traditions is compounded a crisis in individual pastoral care: many believers have no spiritual fathers, or, even if formally having them, display an inability to communicate with the clergy. Besides, many clerics have difficulty providing guidance to their flock, since they have similar family backgrounds and experience comparable problems in implementing religious practices. Even experienced priests are often confused and provide contradictory recommendations. In practice every believer becomes, an individual explorer of the massive written and unwritten tradition of the Orthodox Church.

It is no wonder that the new parishioners turn to the Internet as a primary source of advice in case of uncertainty. On the web, however, as well as in real life, there is no single authoritative discourse on fasting. Instead, one discovers a polyphonic discussion where the clergy and the laity collectively test and evaluate various fasting practices, both traditional and alternative. The discussants share diverse individual experiences, together with random bits of information, such as dubious historical facts, citations with unclear origins, and pious stories from the stockpile of “folk Christianity”. Against this background, historically accurate and rational ecclesiastical argumentation in support of traditional asceticism (fasting from animal products in order to fight passions of the flesh) does not sound satisfactory. People invent additional arguments, sometimes distracting them from traditional fasting. Ancient practices are not necessarily authoritative or valued; rather, they are seen as something irrational what contradict “the spirit” of fasting.

Fasting is not a minor issue for Orthodox believers in Russia. Concerned about not being able to observe the strict rules from the Typikon, people sometimes deny communion to themselves (or are denied by the clergy), which questions the very meaning of “belonging” to the Church. The issue could have been resolved through restoration of individual pastoral care, but the Russian Church currently simply has no human resources to provide it. Likewise, the mechanisms of transmitting traditions within families cannot be instantly reestablished. At the moment simply recognizing that Orthodox practices are diverse would not be of help, because of a serious pressure from below to compile “a Typikon for the laity”. Such a document (however brief) would help many believers (including clergy) to overcome frustration, and to achieve a higher quality of liturgical life.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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