



**THE ELEVENTH LENTEN LETTER
OF PATRIARCH CARDINAL MAR BSHARA AL-RAI
FAST IN THE AGE OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC
BKERKE 2021**

**To their Excellencies, our brother bishops,
The Reverend Superior Generals,
The Reverend priests, monks, and nuns,
And all the beloved children of our Maronite Church in Lebanon, the
Patriarchal domain, and the countries of expansion,
Peace in the Lord Jesus and Apostolic blessings,**

**I address in this letter the law of fasting and the directives pertaining to
the practice of fasting.**

First: The Law of Fasting

- 1- The law of fasting is ancient.** It antedates Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and has accompanied all peoples. For we find much about this law in the writings and inscriptions in Roman and Greek religions, as well as in the ancient Eastern religions where fast expresses contrition and an appeal to Divine mercy in times of tribulation, be it diseases, plagues, injustice, persecution, or war. Hence, fasting is a universal need and duty which a community fulfills through the commitment of its individuals.

Consider the example of the prophet **Joel** who conveyed to the people the oracle of the Lord: "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment" (Joel 2:12-13).

2- In the Holy Bible, **fasting occurs** in various situations. **People fasted** when they felt a need for God: for consolation in times of intense grief; for forgiveness in times of contrition for grave sins; for protection in times of big disasters and pandemics; and for liberation when under the yoke of oppression. The people fasted and prayed when God threatened, through the words of his prophets, to smite them with plagues for unrepentantly persisting in sin.

3- **Fasting which is accompanied by a contrite heart** appeases God's wrath against the sins of the people. This is well illustrated **in the appeal in the name of the Lord of the prophet Jonah to the people of the great city of Nineveh**. Jonah announced: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." "The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had this proclaimed throughout Nineveh: 'By decree of the king and his nobles, no man or beast, no cattle or sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not eat, nor shall they drink water. Man and beast alike must be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God; they all must turn from their evil way and from the violence of their hands. Who knows? God may again repent and turn from his blazing wrath, so that we will not perish.' When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out" (Jonah 3).

Fasting, which is coupled with faith and prayer, obtains its request from God's mercy. Therefore, fasting alone holds no magical value. When the Lord Jesus exorcized the demon out of a tortured boy, his disciples asked him: "Why could we not drive it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. [...] This kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:18-21).

4- **Unrepentant Sin has abounded in the world, and evil has spread**, just like the coronavirus pandemic has pervaded the globe and paralyzed it, infected thousands on this planet, and caused the death of thousands of people of different ages. Moreover, medicine and scientific medical research have failed to control the virus or to find a cure potent enough to wipe it out completely.

The coronavirus pandemic is **an occasion for all of us to expiate** the sins and evil in the world, and **to implore God** to have mercy on us and all of humanity: “Lord, hasten to our rescue. Do not distance yourself from us, Lord. Have mercy, Lord, have mercy on your people.”

Before he began his public ministry, which called people to **“repent and believe in the gospel”** (Mark 1:15), Our Lord Jesus Christ fasted for forty day and forty nights in expiation for the sins of all humans. Satan tempted Jesus three times, but Jesus prevailed with the power of God’s word (Matthew 4:1-22) and became for us an exemplar of fasting, prayer, listening to God’s word, and return to God in the face of temptations and worldly attractions.

5- **In the Sermon on the Mount**, Jesus joined almsgiving to prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:1-18).

Through almsgiving we restore our relationship with our brothers and sisters in need by giving them what is rightly theirs, for “God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples” (*Gaudium et spes*, 69). Helping those in need is a requirement of justice (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 8). Therefore, to refrain from sharing our personal goods with the poor is, to borrow the expression of Saint John Chrysostom, to rob the poor of the rights, life, and goods to which they are entitled.

Through prayer we restore our relationship with God, for through it we elevate our soul to him, stand in his presence, and meditate on our current life situation in the light of his holiness. Thus, we realize that our life is stained with multiple sins, imperfections, dereliction of duty, and mistreatment of, and offenses against, others. Therefore, we raise to God a prayer of praise and contrition, petitioning him to forgive us and have mercy on us and asking for his grace to support our good purposes.

Through fasting we restore our relationship with ourselves. Fasting is penance for our sins, self-control, restraint of our disordered tendencies, and custody of our senses. Our voluntary abstinence from food and our temporary hunger move us to think of those who starve and are permanently hungry and, subsequently, move us to help lift them out of starvation. I would like, on this occasion, to salute and thank all those who, individually or collectively, have implemented charitable initiatives, the supporters of Caritas-Lebanon, our official ecclesiastical social apparatus, the Red Cross, and other charitable organizations and societies, in addition to all the efforts of parishes and institutions. Let us

not forget that the needs of our people are material, spiritual, moral, and cultural.

Second: Measures Pertaining to the Law of Fasting and Abstinence

- 6- **Fasting is refraining from eating** from midnight to noon, with only water allowed, from Ash Monday (February 14) to the Saturday of Light (April 3), **except on the following feast days:** Saint John Maron (March 2), The Forty Martyrs (March 9), Saint Joseph (March 19), The Annunciation (March 25), and **every Saturday and Sunday**, following the teachings of the *Apostolic Constitutions* (AD 380). For **Saturday** commemorates Creation and **Sunday** the Resurrection. The *Constitutions* make an **exception for the Saturday of Light**, because “it is not appropriate to rejoice and celebrate on the day when the Creator is under the earth, for the Creator surpasses all his creatures in nature and honor.”
- 7- Abstinence is **refraining from eating meat and dairy products during Passion Week and every Friday of the year**, except for the period between the feasts of Resurrection and Pentecost, and between Christmas and Epiphany, and on holy days of obligation, such as The Nativity, Epiphany, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Saint Maron, Saint Joseph, The Ascension, The Assumption, The Exaltation of the Cross, All Saints, The Immaculate Conception, and the feast day of the patron saint of a parish.
- 8- Abstinence is practiced according to the ancient, **pious custom** preserved in all Eastern Churches, Catholic and Orthodox alike, in preparation for the following feast days: **The Nativity Fast**, which we have limited to the period between December 16 and December 24, in order to make it easier for the faithful; **The Fast of Saints Peter and Paul**, which we have determined to be between June 21 and June 28; and **The Fast of the Assumption**, which we have limited to the period between August 7 and August 14.
- 9- **The Eucharistic Fast** is abstaining from eating food, starting at midnight, prior to communion, or at least an hour prior to communion,

in preparation for uniting with the Lord by receiving his Body and Blood.

Conclusion

10- The Church has regulated the Liturgy of the Season of Great Lent, which precedes the Passion of Christ the Redeemer, his death and resurrection, since it is a time of preparation and anticipation for meeting the Divine Bridegroom, the Savior of the World, and the Redeemer of Humanity, and for passing over with him to a New Life. For the resurrection is the foundational event which makes Christ the Lord truly present with us forever.

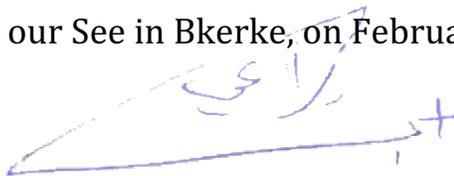
This is how we interpret the following dialogue recorded by Matthew in his Gospel: "The disciples of John approached him and said, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus answered them, 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast'" (Matthew 9:14-15).

We view in the same vein the abstinence which precedes the following feast days: the Nativity, Saints Peter and Paul, and the Assumption, for to receive the grace of, and enter into the exuberance, of these feasts requires spiritual preparation.

We ask God, through the intercession of our Mother, the Virgin Mary, to accept our fasting, heal those sickened by the coronavirus, and wipe out this pandemic with the power of his resurrection and great mercy.

With my continuous prayer and love,

From our See in Bkerke, on February 11, 2021



+ Cardinal Bechara Boutros Rai
Patriarch of Antioch and the East