

Letter to a prisoner

Prison Ministry Totals – 2019

Why and how to fast in prison

Always do what you can do!

St John Chrysostom on true fasting.

Gleanings from the Holy Fathers – Fasting

Top 20 Spiritual Tips by His Beatitude Metropolitan Onuphrius

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Priest Seraphim Holland, PO 37, McKinney TX 75070; General Letter Monday Nov 19/ Dec 2 **The Holy Prophet Obadiah**

Dear brothers and sisters: This is a general letter, that is basically being sent by someone else for me. It will be sent while I'm traveling. If it is mailed when I expect it to be (Monday, Dec 2 on Joe's garage calendar), I will be in Jacksonville, Florida. I will come home Tue, Dec 3, and then leave the next day for a 15 day trip to Uganda. I will not forget you through all of this. I will still pray for you every day. I hope that there will be a letter each Monday, and that 1. You will respond and 2. I will be able to write some current stuff in the letters. For those of you who've written personal letters and for those of you who will write more letters, I intend to reply to you personally. When I reply to you, I take some time to do it. Right now, I don't have that time. Right now, I'm writing this letter from an upstairs room in a big house where we are staying in Florida because of family reunion. There is only so much time right now. I don't expect that I will write a lot when I'm in Uganda, perhaps I will be able to. Please don't be cross with me if you have not received a personal letter. The most important thing I do for you personally is pray for you. I'm writing these letters sort of as a peace offering for those who haven't received a letter from me in a while.

Prison Ministry totals - 2019

Statistics never tells the whole story, but below are the totals for 2019. These are for all of my prison visits. The first and the third Wednesdays I would generally stay overnight on Tuesday night, go to two prisons on Wednesday, drive down to Huntsville, go to two more prisons on Thursday, then have a long 4 hour or even 5 hour drive home. The second and the fourth Wednesdays of the month, I would just stay overnight on Tuesday and go to one prison and come home on Wednesday. Sometime in the year, someone was paroled from Powledge, so I no longer went there and my four prison trip became a three prison trip. I've also gone to a couple of other prisons during this year. There was also some driving and other stuff outside of prison this year for prison ministry.

I consider the most important part of my prison ministry to be that I pray for each of you every day. My prayers are poor, but God will even hear poor prayers if we continue with them. You should be sure to pray for all of your loved ones and you're not so loved ones every day. You have to consider that as important as eating. You wouldn't choose to go without food for a day, would you? You should not choose to go without intercession for those people that are important in your life, whether for positive or negative reasons. I am absolutely convinced that there is no way to make progress in the spiritual life if we do not emphasize daily intercessory prayers.

Prison ministry totals for 2019

- Prison visits: 67
- Hotel stays: 47
- Mileage: 13,864
- Letters written: I have no idea. Way over 100, and that is still not enough.

I traveled for prison ministry only once or twice, I think, during the first two months of the year, because of foreign travel, and I kinda hit a wall in November. There was an illness, and to be honest with you, sometimes thoughts just get in the way. The stuff that I tell you to do, I do also, and just like you, it doesn't always work, but I keep doing it. There was also a lot of trouble with counts and lockdowns, and people not showing up for reasons that were unclear to me. Because of beginning of the year and end of the year travel, prison ministry was approximately 8 months of the year. If not for other travel, these numbers would be 33% higher. In a so-called "perfect" year, I would visit 10 prisons in a month. For now, I'm not going to Powledge, so that would actually be a maximum of eight prisons in a month. I may add Telford once a month next year. Of course, there are no "perfect" numbers, or "perfect" anything in prison ministry, because of lockdowns and feast days for the parish, travel abroad, or because of diocesan business, etc.

The Nativity Fast

We are in the midst of the fasting period for Nativity. This year it began on Thanksgiving day! It is very normal in Christian tradition to prepare ourselves for important feasts. There is a fasting period before the major feasts of the Christian year – Pascha (Easter), and Nativity (Christmas), and also before the Dormition (falling asleep of the Theotokos), and the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul. We also fast on most Wednesdays and Fridays of the year.

If a person is to fast well, he must know the reason for fasting. We fast because we are sinners, and because we get distracted, because we are weak and because we are self-indulgent. We fast in order to give something to God, but even more importantly, to learn to be ascetical. Life is ascetical. Those who do not understand this will not succeed in life. Fasting is a small asceticism: we choose to eat certain foods and not others that we like. Fasting is *doing something that we can do*, so that God will give us the grace to do things that we cannot do. This is an important principle of Christianity. ***You do the things you can do, so that you can learn to do the things you cannot do.***

Each fast differs a little bit in "character" and rigor. The Nativity Fast is one of joyful expectation, and is one of the easiest of the long fasts. Here are the "rules". On all days of the fast, we do not eat any (land or air) "animal product" - beef, chicken, pork, fowl, etc or their "products" – cheese, eggs, milk, butter, etc. We also do not eat fish, wine and olive oil on all weekdays. On weekends, we may have fish, wine and oil. There are lots of exceptions based upon which saint is celebrated on the calendar. It is worthy of note that regarding animals of the sea, we fast only from fish. You can eat all of the clams, shrimp, lobster!, etc. that you want – in other words any fish that does not have scales. That does not include whale! That is not a fish.

Of course, some of these rules sound funny to someone on prison. You have probably never seen olive oil, or (good tasting 😊) alcohol, or lobster in prison! Fish is also rare. In prison, we must adapt. If you have the strength to fast strictly in prison, I hope that you do so. In fact, if you have the strength to do it and you don't, ***you cannot prosper when you do not do the things that you're able to do.*** Only an individual with his conscience, can know what he is capable of. I would say that you are capable of not having meat, if you choose. Or perhaps you must have meat because of your health, but you can choose to

not eat the cake, or get certain treats at the commissary, or to not use condiments. Everyone must make a way of life that fits their conscience and their physical abilities.

Another word regarding your physical abilities: you're capable of more than you think you are capable of. That's the way grace works. We do a little bit with good intent, and God multiplies our efforts. So, in my opinion, you should never say: "I cannot fast, or I cannot say a long prayer rule, or I cannot stand in church for two hours, or I cannot forgive or tolerate this person". You should always say something along the lines of: "I cannot do this *now* because of my sins, and weakness but *God will help me.*"

I will tell you something, as a word of warning. In prison of course most things are provided for you, whether you want them or not. You're told to do this or do that, and you're given one option for a meal. In the so-called "free world", where many people are still not free, it is not like that at all. You can choose to fast or not fast. You can choose to go to get a hamburger from 10 different hamburger places within less than a mile of each other, on any fast day if you wish. If you do not work on limiting your self-indulgence in prison, you will have a tough time limiting it in the so-called "free" world.

By the way, I have seen people in prison who are more free, and many people outside of prison who are not free. *Freedom is a condition of the soul*, not of the lock on the door to your room. In prison, you are forced to go without things. There is no virtue in doing something that you are forced to do. There is virtue in doing things of your own free will. That is why fasting is so successful in helping a human being become close to God. They learn virtue, which is always their responsibility and not someone else's. If you are not fasting, I advise you very much to try in some way to fast.

I will give you 3 examples that edified me. There was a time when there was fried chicken, and it was a fast day. The person was so filled with zeal that they gave the chicken to someone else. They told me later that they were filled with the great warmth in their heart. Try it! Another person really loved sweets, but on a fast day, he gave his cake away. These are small things, but they loom very large in the spiritual life, because they are an act of asceticism. I think I remember another case. A person did not fast on Wednesday, but on Thursday when there was cake which was allowed according to the fasting rules, they fasted and gave it away. It's never too late to do the right thing.

There are two other very important aspects to fasting periods and fasting in general. We are to fast with prayer. You should increase your prayer. If you fast without prayer, you do not derive much benefit. If you pray without fasting you do not derive much benefit. You should also give alms. Those of you who make commissary, you have the ability to give alms to those who do not. You can also give alms by giving your time to those who need it. Perhaps someone cannot write, and they want to write a letter to their family, or perhaps they get confused by legal forms, and you can help them. Perhaps there is a weird person that nobody talks to, or that people make fun of, or even abuse, but you can talk to them and treat them as a human being. All of these things are alms giving.

Anyone who has fasted for any length of time should be able to discern some of the benefits. They come over time, and it is very difficult if not impossible to make significant progress in the spiritual life without some fasting. This is because, if we are totally honest with ourselves, we know that we are by nature inclined to selfishness and self-indulgence, and forgetfulness about God. Fasting acts directly against these latter two tendencies – we choose to **not** indulge ourselves for God's sake, and by choosing to keep a fast (and trying to pray more than we usually do, and read spiritual things too), we are less likely to be forgetful. Fasting acts indirectly against selfishness because a forgetful self-indulgent person is always selfish.

I am asking you to fast as you are able, and to expect God to help you learn things about yourself and Him during your fast. Fasting is a little bit like taking blinders off – we see things more clearly – both good and bad. You may learn some things about yourself – positive and negative. You may be able to pray more, or perhaps have trouble praying, and even this latter condition may be beneficial to you, because we always have trouble praying because of something in ourselves that is blocking our prayer.

We are on the road to perfection, made possible because of the perfect life of the God-man, Jesus Christ. This takes effort, and fasting has been shown to always help us in this task.

The following is a wonderful, long quote from St John Chrysostom that explains the significance of fasting. He emphasizes that fasting is not just what you do not eat, but what you do and don't do to and for your fellow man. We fast to improve in the most important virtue – Love. After this are some quotes from the Holy Fathers

St John Chrysostom on true fasting.

This is a long quotation, but very profitable to read. It explains the purpose of fasting, the proper attitude towards it, its effects on our spiritual state, and how fasting not done in the right spirit is actually injurious to us.

We also see from St John's words the reason we have a fast free week following the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee. He does not reference this custom, but his explanation is the reason it exists. The homily from which this quotation was taken has many other profitable things about fasting.

St John Chrysostom, [Letters: Homilies on the Statutes](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.xix.v.htm), Homily III, (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.xix.v.htm>)

Fasting is a help to us; we should approach fasts with expectation of spiritual improvement.

7. Let us not then despair of our safety, but let us pray; let us make invocation; let us supplicate; let us go on embassy to the King that is above with many tears! **We have this fast too as an ally, and as an assistant in this good intercession.**

Therefore, as when the winter is over and the summer is appearing, the sailor draws his vessel to the deep; and the soldier burnishes his arms, and makes ready his steed for the battle; and the husbandman sharpens his sickle; and the traveler boldly undertakes a long journey, and the wrestler strips and bares himself for the contest.

So too, when the fast makes its appearance, like a kind of spiritual summer, let us as soldiers burnish our weapons; and as husbandmen let us sharpen our sickle; and as sailors let us order our thoughts against the waves of extravagant desires; and as travelers let us set out on the journey towards heaven; and as wrestlers let us strip for the contest. For the believer is at once a husbandman, and a sailor, and a soldier, a wrestler, and a traveler.

Hence St. Paul saith, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers. Put on therefore the whole armour of God." [Eph. vi. 12.](#)

Hast thou observed the wrestler? Hast thou observed the soldier? If thou art a wrestler, it is necessary for thee to engage in the conflict naked. If a soldier, it behooves thee to stand in the battle line armed at all points. How then are both these things possible, to be naked, and yet not naked; to be clothed, and yet not clothed! How? I will tell thee. Divest thyself of worldly

business, and thou hast become a wrestler. Put on the spiritual amour, and thou hast become a soldier. Strip thyself of worldly cares, for the season is one of wrestling. Clothe thyself with the spiritual amour, for we have a heavy warfare to wage with demons. Therefore also it is needful we should be naked, so as to offer nothing that the devil may take hold of, while he is wrestling with us; and to be fully armed at all points, so as on no side to receive a deadly blow.

Cultivate thy soul.

Cut away the thorns.

Sow the word of godliness.

Propagate and nurse with much care the fair plants of divine wisdom, and thou hast become a husbandman.

And Paul will say to thee, "The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits." 2 Tim. ii. 6. He too himself practiced this art. Therefore writing to the Corinthians, he said, "I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." 1 Cor. iii. 6.

Spiritual and physical effects of Fasting.

Sharpen thy sickle, which thou hast blunted through gluttony—sharpen it by fasting. Lay hold of the pathway which leads towards heaven; rugged and narrow as it is, lay hold of it, and journey on.

And how mayest thou be able to do these things? By subduing thy body, and bringing it into subjection. For when the way grows narrow, the corpulence that comes of gluttony is a great hindrance.

Keep down the waves of inordinate desires.

Repel the tempest of evil thoughts.

Preserve the boat; display much skill, and thou hast become a pilot.

But we shall have the fast for a groundwork and instructor in all these things.

Real Fasting: from meat *and* sins.

8. I speak not, indeed, of such a fast as most persons keep, but of real fasting ; not merely an abstinence from meats; but from sins too. For the nature of a fast is such, that it does not suffice to deliver those who practice it, unless it be done according to a suitable law. "For the wrestler," it is said, "is not crowned unless he strive lawfully." 2 Tim. ii. 5.

Why do we fast after the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee?

To the end then, that when we have gone through the labor of fasting, we forfeit not the crown of fasting, we should understand how, and after what manner, it is necessary to conduct this business; since **that Pharisee also fasted,** Luke xviii. 12. **but afterwards went down empty, and destitute of the fruit of fasting.** The Publican fasted not; and yet he was accepted in preference to him who had fasted; in order that thou **mayest learn that fasting is unprofitable, except all other duties follow with it.**

The Ninevites fasted, and won the favor of God. Jonah iii. 10. The Jews, fasted too, and profited nothing, nay, they departed with blame. Isa. lviii. 3, 7; 1 Cor. ix. 26.

Since then the danger in fasting is so great to those who do not know how they ought to fast, we should learn the laws of this exercise, in order that we may not "run uncertainly," nor "beat the air," nor while we are fighting contend with a shadow.

Fasting is a medicine; but a medicine, though it be never so profitable, becomes frequently useless owing to the unskilfulness of him who employs it. For it is necessary to know, moreover, the time when it should be applied, and the requisite quantity of it; and the temperament of body that admits it; and the nature of the country, and the season of the year; and the corresponding diet; as well as various other particulars; any of which, if one overlooks, he will mar all the rest that have been named. Now if, when the body needs healing, such exactness is required on our part, much more ought we, when our care is about the soul, and we seek to heal the distempers of the mind, to look, and to search into every particular with the utmost accuracy.

...

Admonition - Dost thou fast? Give me proof of it by thy works!.

11. **I have said these things, not that we may disparage fasting, but that we may honor fasting; for the honor of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices; since he who limits his fasting only to an abstinence from meats, is one who especially disparages it.**

Dost thou fast? Give me proof of it by thy works!

Is it said by what kind of works? If thou seest a poor man, take pity on him! If thou seest in enemy, be reconciled to him! If thou seest a friend gaining honor, envy him not! If thou seest a handsome woman, pass her by! For let not the mouth only fast, but also the eye, and the ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being pure from rapine and avarice. Let the feet fast, by ceasing from running to the unlawful spectacles. Let the eyes fast, being taught never to fix themselves rudely upon handsome countenances, or to busy themselves with strange beauties.

Fasting for all the senses explained

For looking is the food of the eyes, but if this be such as is unlawful or forbidden, it mars the fast; and upsets the whole safety of the soul; but if it be lawful and safe, it adorns fasting. For it would be among things the most absurd to abstain from lawful food because of the fast, but with the eyes to touch even what is forbidden. Dost thou not eat flesh? Feed not upon lasciviousness by means of the eyes.

Let the ear fast also. The fasting of the ear consists in refusing to receive evil speakings and calumnies. "Thou shalt not receive a false report," it says.

12. **Let the mouth too fast** from disgraceful speeches and railing. For what doth it profit if we abstain from birds and fishes; and yet bite and devour our brethren? The evil speaker eateth the flesh of his brother, and biteth the body of his neighbor.

Because of this Paul utters the fearful saying, "If ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another." Gal. v. 15. Thou hast not fixed thy teeth in the flesh, but thou hast fixed the slander in the soul, and inflicted the wound of evil suspicion; thou hast harmed, in a thousand ways, thyself and him, and many others, for in slandering a neighbor thou hast made him who listens to the slander worse...

This document is at: <http://www.orthodox.net/articles/true-fasting-saint-john-chrysostom.html>, <http://www.orthodox.net/articles/true-fasting-saint-john-chrysostom.doc>

Gleanings from the Holy Fathers – Fasting

Prayer, fasting, vigil and all other Christian activities, however good they may be in themselves, do not constitute the aim of our Christian life, although they serve as the indispensable means of reaching this end. The true aim of our Christian life

consists in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ's sake, they are only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God. But mark, my son, only the good deed done for Christ's sake brings us the fruits of the Holy Spirit. All that is not done for Christ's sake, even though it be good, brings neither reward in the future life nor the grace of God in this. That is why our Lord Jesus Christ said: He who gathers not with Me scatters (Luke 11:23). Not that a good deed can be called anything but gathering, since even though it is not done for Christ's sake, yet it is good. Scripture says: In every nation he who fears God and works righteousness is acceptable to Him (St Seraphim of Sarov)

Fasting is an exceptional virtue; it represses bodily impulses and gives strength to the soul to fight against the poisoning of the heart through the senses, and provides it with a remedy against any past poisoning. Fasting causes the mind to be cleansed constantly. It withers up every evil thought and brings healthy, godly thoughts -- holy thoughts that enlighten the mind and kindle it with more zeal and spiritual fervor. Elder Ephraim of Philotheou Mount Athos, "Counsels from the Holy Mountain"

A worker takes the trouble to get hold of the instruments that he requires. He does so not simply to have them and not use them. Nor is there any profit for him in merely possessing the instruments. What he wants is, with their help, to produce the crafted objective for which these are the efficient means. In the same way, fasting, vigils, scriptural meditation, nakedness and total deprivation do not constitute perfection but are the means to perfection. They are not in themselves the end point of a discipline, but an end is attained to through them. St. John Cassian, Conference One

Abba Isidore said, "If you fast regularly, do not be inflated with pride; if you think highly of yourself because of it, then you had better eat meat. It is better for a man to eat meat than to be inflated with pride and glorify himself." The Desert Fathers

Abba John the Dwarf said, "If a king wanted to take possession of his enemy's city, he would begin by cutting off the water and the food and so his enemies, dying of hunger, would submit to him. It is the same with the passions of the flesh; if a man goes about fasting and hungry the enemies of his soul grow weak." Sr. Benedicta Ward, "The Sayings of the Desert Fathers," (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1975), pp. 85-89

Beware of limiting the good of fasting to mere abstinence from meats. Real fasting is alienation from evil. 'Loose the bands of wickedness.' For give your neighbor the mischief he has done you. Forgive him his trespasses against you. Do not 'fast for strife and debate.' You do not devour flesh, but you devour your brother. You abstain from wine, but you indulge in outrages. You wait for evening before you take food, but you spend the day in the law courts. Woe to those who are 'drunken, but not with wine.' Anger is the intoxication of the soul, and makes it out of its wits like wine. St. Basil, in his homilies on the Holy Spirit

Bodily purity is primarily attained through fasting, and through bodily purity comes spiritual purity. Abstinence from food, according to the words of that son of grace, St. Ephraim the Syrian, means: 'Not to desire or demand much food, either sweet or costly; to eat nothing outside the stated times; not to give oneself over to gratification of the appetite; not to stir up hunger in oneself by looking at good food; and not to desire one or another sort of food. The Prologue from Ochrid - by St. Nikolai Velimirovich (Volume 4, p 338)

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Top 20 Spiritual Tips by His Beatitude Metropolitan Onuphrius

1. Who Our Guardian Angel rejoices over our good deeds and grieves when we do evil. We should try to live in such a way that the Angels may rejoice at our lives.



2. To avoid sin, one must know what the will of God is. This is what we learn from our conscience, and this is what we learn from the Holy Scriptures.
3. The person who always has a prayer on his lips and in his heart, coupled with repentance, is a difficult target for the evil powers because prayer protects him.
4. These are challenging times, but these are also times when you need to be attentive to yourselves, so that political passions and human wisdom would not lead us astray from the path of the right faith. If we keep our faith pure, if we try to live by faith, God will send us peace and tranquility. However if we sink into the abyss of human passions, enmity, and confrontation, then, of course, we will stray from the Lord's way, and it will not do any good.
5. The ability to tolerate one's neighbor is the wisdom of life. One should perceive one's neighbor as he is. Do you want him to be better? Pray for him. God can make him better. This is how Christian patience manifests itself.
6. Just as a person suffocates without air, so a soul without prayer becomes dead and insensitive.
7. Prayer is necessary not for God but for us; it is like spiritual oxygen without which a person dies. This conversation with God provides a source of life for a person.
8. It is one thing when people shed blood for Christ, and the other when they tolerate abuse, insults, and resentment for the sake of their faith. Such people receive the crown of bloodless martyrdom.
9. Thoughts filled with love, mercy, patience, and respect attract God's grace, and those that harbor anger, hatred, and pride drive it away. If we are overcome by anger, hatred, and pride, it indicates that God's image within us is damaged.
10. Nowadays, we need to live according to Christian laws and not according to the laws of this world. There is no need to watch how the world lives; it is governed by somewhat different rules.
11. If God's grace is lacking, a man can be placed in the most beautiful place, surrounded by all the benefits of the world, and he will still be unhappy.
12. The more one collects earthly goods, the more desperate one becomes, because they do not bring spiritual joy. You can collect all the treasures of the earth and put them in front of you, and still be the most miserable person.
13. Sorrows are a spiritual lesson by which a man learns his weakness and the power of God. The harder the sorrow, the deeper the lesson is. All we have to do is to endure these tribulations with patience and gratitude to God.
14. You do not have to wait. Great things are made by great people, and we are small people. Hence, we have to do small things.
15. Love for our enemies is not easy, but we must pray, read the Holy Scriptures, coerce ourselves, and be patient in dealing with those who hurt us.
16. During our earthly lives, we need to make sure we have a decent garment for our souls. Our soul garments are soiled by sin. You must repent immediately after you have committed a sin.
17. Courage means going against the current. As you know, only dead fish flow freely wherever the river flows, while living fish flow upstream to the pure spring and the pristine environment. Only those who have been able to summon up some measure of humility are capable of true courage.
18. They say there are a lot of restrictions in Christianity, but that's not true. Anything is okay but in good measure and with reason. The saints show us how little we really need for survival.
19. If a person pays attention to himself and lives a decent life according to God's commandments, then he feels the presence of God inside him, beside him and in the whole Universe.
20. Every man is a vessel of God's grace. By touching a person, you touch the grace of God.

Translated by The Catalogue of Good Deeds

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