



Facebook as a Lenten Discipline

An Orthodox Pilot Study

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Another name for Great Lent is the Great Fast. Many hymns of the Church throughout the season offer reminders about the fast. Church messages for Great Lent emphasize the ascetic disciplines of the season, but especially the fast. They call for repentance and discipline in order to be ready to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ.

Over the last few years, clergy and others have begun preaching about restricting one's use of technology, encouraging a "technology fast" as a Lenten discipline. The goal of fasting and ascetic discipline during Lent is "to make us conscious of our dependence upon God," as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes. Limiting our use of electronic devices to break our dependence on (or even addiction to) technology and focus instead on our interior life, even for a short period, has entered a new awareness within the context of fasting.

But are people changing their use of technology in real ways? Is their use of technology affecting the way they observe Great Lent?

There is a well-established Lenten discipline of fasting, with norms that are hundreds of years old. There is no established discipline for a technology fast.

On the first day of Great Lent 2016 (March 14), I posted to my Facebook page that I was interested in Orthodox people's religious behavior and asked for volunteers to complete a brief survey. Seventy-one people offered to take the survey. Fifty-nine returned the survey. (Two of the surveys could not be used.) The survey had three primary questions.

1. WILL YOU CHANGE YOUR USE OF FACEBOOK OR OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA SITES DURING GREAT LENT? IF YES, HOW?

The responses were about equal. Twenty-six of the respondents said yes; thirty-one said no. Of the twenty-six who said that they would change their use, twenty-two said they would reduce their time. Four said they would make their posts more reflective of the Lenten season. While there were many comments, among the more interesting comments were:

"I have heard from at least a dozen youth and young adults that they have either given up social media during Lent or have made a conscious effort to use it less during this season."

"I will apply to myself the same disciplines, if you will, that I attempt to apply in 'real life'—in my relationships and interactions with people; to seek love, truth, honesty, purity, humility, peace, forgiveness, justice, mercy, wisdom, knowledge, etc."

"I intend to cut down on my FB time and read only Orthodox Christian or Christian posts or maybe look at photos of family and friends. I will abstain from reading anything political or divisive ..."

2. DID YOU POST ANYTHING FOR ANY OF THE PRE-LENTEN SUNDAYS, MEATFARE, CHEESEFARE OR FORGIVENESS VESPERS? IF YES, WHAT DID YOU POST?

While Great Lent begins on Clean Monday, the three pre-Lenten weeks before raise themes associated with Lent and ease us into the fasting discipline. During these days, parishes will often hold a Mardi Gras type of event filled with food and festivity to contrast with the more sober Lenten period. This question explored how people posted to Facebook during the pre-Lenten weeks. Did they share a last meat-filled meal? Did they share news or photos from a parish Apokreatiko Glendi (Meatfare celebration)?

The responses were about equal. Twenty-seven of the respondents said yes; thirty said no.

3. DID YOU POST SOME KIND OF REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS AS PART OF FORGIVENESS SUNDAY?

The Vespers for Clean Monday, ushering in Great Lent, is often called Forgiveness Vespers. The hymns for that service are rich with themes of forgiveness, repentance and the beginning of the fast. In many parishes, at the end of the Vespers, there is a forgiveness ceremony: as it is usually practiced, the priest stands before the congregation and the faithful, one by one, approach him and say, "Forgive me, a sinner." He responds by repeating the phrase, the parishioner takes a spot to his right, and so on. Each person in the congregation who wishes to participate in the ceremony approaches everyone in the circle until all have greeted one another with the request for forgiveness.

To the initial question, nineteen of the respondents said yes, they did post a forgiveness request on Facebook; the rest of the respondents said no.

3A. DID YOU ALSO ATTEND A FORGIVENESS SUNDAY VESPERS SERVICE?

Twenty-eight attended a service, and twenty-six did not attend a service. I was most interested in the responses to the next follow-up questions as I attempted to determine the interplay between church attendance and social media use:

3B. IF YES [YOU ATTENDED A FORGIVENESS SUNDAY VESPERS SERVICE], THEN WHY DID YOU ALSO POST A REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS ON FACEBOOK?

"Ten minutes before the service I made the post. It is a reminder to some of my extended family who do not follow the Church calendar. I try not to actually ask for forgiveness from people over Facebook. I believe that should be done in person."

"There were very few people at the Vesper Service [sic], most of whom I am not close with. I wanted to humble myself before both my Orthodox and non-Orthodox friends and family."

"To ask for forgiveness to those individuals who are very far away from me and our only form of communication is via Facebook."

"I was a bit conflicted about it because it seems somewhat contrived; also I was somewhat hesitant because it was outside of the liturgical context. But the spirit of the practice within the whole idea of Lent in the Church made me think it would be appropriate—I would ask people in person outside of the liturgical context, so why not on Facebook? Also, since a written medium makes communication so much more volatile—it so much easier to misunderstand, misinterpret, or even be harsher than I would be in person and therefore more likely that I have offended people—so I decided it was a good thing to do."

"Not a bad idea ... To show friends that I am contrite if I have offended them ... To ask non-Orthodox friends for forgiveness."

3C. IF NO [YOU DID NOT ATTEND A FORGIVENESS SUNDAY VESPERS SERVICE], THEN WHY DID YOU POST SOMETHING?

"I was reminded to do so when I saw other Orthodox friends posting throughout the past week, and certainly have ample need to forgive and to be forgiven!! BUT [sic] I feel that my FB request is nowhere as powerful as the liturgical tradition; rather, it easily becomes just an Orthodox seasonal nicety, by its impersonal and general nature ... very different from if I look you in the eye and ask for forgiveness directly. So I have mixed feelings about it."

"1) I wanted to ask forgiveness to those I do not see in person often and/or may have offended. 2) I wanted to remind and educate non-practicing Orthodox and non-Orthodox about our faith."

Some expressed misgivings about posting forgiveness requests on Facebook:

"I feel strongly that asking for forgiveness should not be generic in nature, and those FB posts feel that way to me."

"It's not something that translates adequately to the Facebook format. Face-to-face, eye-to-eye, with a holy kiss—Facebook is not personal enough to reproduce this. It's not incarnational enough, one might say."

"No—I don't see the value of just saying 'Please forgive me' when I don't know who will [be] reading it. It doesn't seem to really be of value when I'm not saying it directly to someone."

"This year, I actually reached out to those close to me and asked them personally. I feel like a broad public service announcement takes away from the words. Also, when I got on FB it's all I saw. I didn't want to be just another person."

From this small pilot study, can we say that a technology fast has developed as a spiritual or ascetic practice among Orthodox Christians? Twenty-two of the participants (not quite forty percent) said they would decrease their use of Facebook, indicating that a new practice could be emerging.

In the essay “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” scholar Dorothy Bass considers a number of factors to understand the development of spiritual practices, such as whether they are practiced together, over time, with a standard of excellence and with the recognition that one’s daily activity is tangled up with the things God is doing in the world. There is a well-established Lenten discipline of fasting, with norms that are hundreds of years old. There is no established discipline for a technology fast. Cutting back does fit the general practice that Lent proposes for food, but what would the “standard of excellence” be for a technology fast?

It does not appear that the survey participants were practicing their technology fast within a community. As Sherry Turkle writes, “Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities. Its members help each other in the most practical ways” (from *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*). The responses show a more individualistic approach to the fast. While the Facebook post is an example of “social” media, the responses suggest the feeling of being “alone together,” as Turkle calls it. She writes, “We go online because we are busy but end up spending more time with technology and less with each other. We defend connectivity as a way to be close, even as we effectively hide from each other.”

In his essay “Liturgical Migrations into Cyberspace: Theological Reflections,” liturgical scholar Stefan Böntert argues that “Christian rituals online can supplement and expand established liturgical forms but cannot replace them.” A hypothesis of my survey was that the digital environment is not augmenting parish involvement but replacing it. The survey, even with its small sample, suggests that Facebook did not entirely replace parish participation or Lenten parish life, but it did become a way of expanding them.

Böntert also notes that the digital environment disembodies liturgical practice; that is, it removes the physical and personal connections. Some survey participants clearly noticed this difference, recognizing that the liturgical practice of asking for forgiveness lost some significance when done online.

Interestingly, and also unexpectedly, a few respondents noticed that their Facebook post for forgiveness reached non-Orthodox people as well. Orthodox practices tend to be closed to the non-Orthodox, or at least difficult for them to participate in. The fact that a few of the respondents’ posts broadened the reach of their request for forgiveness makes me wonder if Facebook is broadening the perspectives of those who posted—making them more ecumenical, perhaps—as opposed to the rather closed parish ritual.

With its small sample, this is merely a pilot study, a field test of what could be happening. A larger sample including demographic information would be interesting, as would asking a group to monitor their Facebook usage during Lent, measuring intent against actual practice.

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