

*Chi vuol godere la festa, digiuni la vigilia:*<sup>1</sup>  
On the Relationship between Fasting and Feasting

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Historically in the Roman Catholic tradition and still today in the Orthodox tradition roughly half the days of the year are to some degree fast-days. Given that, fasting represents a central – and generally sorely neglected – aspect of the culinary history of Christian societies. The need for culinary historians to examine with care the rules for fasting and abstinence is, however, not to be understood merely in a straightforward manner; rather, the sobriety of fast-days is to be seen in relation both to the ‘ordinary’ days of the year and, perhaps more interestingly, in relation to the feasting of celebrations and holy days, to which the fast-days are typically juxtaposed: fasting and feasting in the Christian world are two sides of a single coin of spiritual and bodily nourishment, the one giving meaning to the other.

66 In this paper, I examine the rules for Christian fasting generally and argue that they are to be understood in a complex way, involving: 1) theological issues; 2) social issues, which include matters that pertain, for example, to ethno-historical identities; 3) practical or economic issues, involving, among other things, the general and seasonal availability of foods; and 4) aesthetic issues, which lie at the very heart of a given culture’s culinary life. All of these aspects of fasting stand, moreover, in relation to contrasting aspects of feasting. As a case study, I investigate the Greek Orthodox tradition of abstaining periodically from the use of olive oil, a practice that has no analogue in the Roman Catholic tradition.

**Culinary culture and the Christian calendar**

Christianity was reared within the confines of the Roman Empire, born of Judaism and flourishing strongly in the Hellenistic culture of the eastern Mediterranean, before gradually spreading thence to Italy and the Latinized western parts of the Empire. With regard to the new religion’s relationship to food, Christianity took from the start its own stance over against those of Judaism and the Græco-Roman mainstream, rejecting altogether the Hebrews’ inviolable dietary restrictions of Mosaic law but also embracing in a fashion the Jewish tradition of making fasting a key element in the human dialogue with God, while at the same time developing its own particular conception of the meaning of sacrificial feasting in terms of the Eucharist. In the course of its first few centuries, Christianity differentiated itself further in terms of its culinary culture from its forebears and rivals through its development of the practice of fasting, in terms both of the extent to which fasting was required and of the significance of the act itself.<sup>2</sup>

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While Christian fasting at first surely maintained its Jewish character – short periods of abstaining totally from food (and drink) with an essentially penitential or propitiatory purpose and an often communal orientation – it began already by Late Antiquity to broaden and drift in the direction that was then fully developed in the Middle Ages. This more familiar Christian approach involves for the general population both short periods of fasting in the narrow sense – i.e. total abstinence – alongside longer periods of sustained partial abstinence – i.e. the setting aside of specific foods for more or less protracted spans of time.<sup>3</sup> The specific rules regarding when the short, full fasts and the various kinds of partial abstinence were to take place, as well as the rules regarding what foods were to be abstained from, show considerable variation between different branches of Christianity, with further significant variation found sometimes across time and space even within a given denomination. In the present context, a detailed discussion of these rules is neither possible nor necessary and so I will focus on the traditional practices among the Roman Catholics of southern Italy and members of the Orthodox Church in Greece which are most relevant for our discussion.

Christian fasting is associated in most people's minds primarily, if not exclusively, with the traditions surrounding Lent; and rightly so insofar as the Lenten fast was likely the very first one observed by early Christians and has always remained the most important one, both in terms of the scale of the dietary restrictions involved and, more significantly, in terms of its spiritual value. Indeed, today in the Roman Catholic Church and among most Protestant denominations, to the limited degree that community sanctioned fasting is carried out at all, it is in association with Lent. From an historical perspective, however, Lent is only part of a series of occasions when fasting by Christians is or was considered necessary, a series which spans the entire year.

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As backdrop to the schedule of the various specific fasts and feasts of the Christian calendar, there has been in both Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox tradition a related dietary rhythm to the days of the week. Sunday has been considered in both west and east an inherently joyous day, associated with the resurrection and habitually celebrated at table, and it stands then in contrast to the more solemn days when fasting is appropriate, namely, the days of Wednesday, associated with the betrayal of Christ by Judas, and especially Friday, associated with the crucifixion. There is an interaction between this weekly frame of joyous and solemn days and the extended periods of fasting and celebration in the liturgical year: Sundays during solemn periods are marked by a break from fasting or a reduced level of fasting, while Wednesdays and especially Fridays have tended to be marked by particularly rigorous forms of fasting during solemn periods of the calendar; on the other hand, the inherent solemnity of Wednesdays and Fridays and their strong association with fasting can be overridden by the concurrence of a major feast-day.

Over this underlying frame of the days of the week, the main traditional fasts and feasts in the Roman Catholic Church were as follows. Coinciding with the beginning of the Catholic liturgical year was the beginning of Advent season, which includes four

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Sundays and historically involved a fast during the three to four weeks leading up to Christmas. With the feast-day of the Nativity of Jesus comes an extended celebration of the twelve days of Christmas itself which continues on to the immediately following Epiphany (6 January) and thence on to the minor feast of the Baptism of Jesus (13 January), after which begins a period of 'ordinary time' that concludes ultimately with the beginning of Lent. Though not a liturgical event, at the popular level in Catholic lands, people have long celebrated and feasted to various degrees at 'Carnival' in the period immediately preceding the onset of Lent, achieving in many places a level of revelry and indulgence that corresponds well to the solemnity and sobriety of the longest and most rigorous of the extended periods of fasting and abstinence. This Lenten fast in the Catholic Church traditionally begins on Ash Wednesday, ends on Holy Saturday, and so – setting aside the intervening Sundays, when one is obliged not to fast but rather to be joyous – comprises a total of 40 lean-days.

Further fast-days in the Catholic tradition are the so-called 'Ember days' or *Quattuor Tempora*: in the week beginning each of the year's four seasons strict fasts were to be held on the Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. The Rogation Days – Major Rogation on 25 June and Minor Rogation being the three days preceding the Feast of the Ascension – were also observed with fasts. Finally, the vigils of other feast-days were also to be marked by fasting from early in Church history, especially the vigils of Christmas (i.e. Christmas Eve), the Assumption and the Apostles (28 June); to these were later added the vigils of Pentecost, St John the Baptist, St Lawrence and All Saints.<sup>4</sup>

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The Eastern Orthodox liturgical calendar is in all general ways similar to its Catholic counterpart, with a combination of fixed and moveable feasts, the inclusion of extended fasts and the general juxtaposition of fast-days to feast-days. The two also shared until recently the underlying weekly pattern throughout the year of regular fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, with Sunday also being set aside as a sort of weekly feast-day. Fasting practices in the Orthodox world have certainly been maintained to a greater degree than they have among Roman Catholics but from an historical perspective one notes too that Orthodox fasting has been stricter with regard to the range of food restrictions, more complicated in its rules, and more broadly in effect across the calendar. In particular one notes that in the Eastern Orthodox calendar there are four periods of extended fasts, with the longest being, of course, the Great Lent or Easter Fast in the spring, which is followed by the Apostles' Fast – of very variable length – in May/June, then the Dormition or Virgin Mary's Fast in the first half of August (Dormition corresponding to the Catholic Assumption), and finally the Nativity Fast, which corresponds to Advent but involves forty days of fasting (as opposed to the four weeks of fasting in the Catholic Church). In addition, there are some further short fasts that are required (Eve of Theophany, Beheading of John the Baptist, etc.) and four periods when fasting is proscribed and which stand in association with the fasting seasons mentioned above. All told, the Eastern Orthodox calendar includes 180–200 fast-days per year (Trepanowski & Bloomer 2010).

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For present purposes, we need to consider briefly the specific rules of abstinence observed in the Greek Orthodox tradition. Here there are several levels of restricted eating between the extremes of days when no restrictions apply whatsoever and those few days when total or near-total abstinence from food is expected, with the intermediary levels involving:

1. abstinence from meat;
2. abstinence from meat and other animal products (esp. eggs and dairy);
3. abstinence from all animal products plus fish (with backbones);
4. abstinence from all animal products plus fish, wine and olive oil.

The first three levels are observed on days of fasting that coincide with occasions that are in some sense or to some degree festive and so mitigate the level of fasting required. The fourth level of fasting is known as *xerophagy* or 'dry eating' and is the level of abstinence appropriate not only to the bulk of the days during the extended fasting seasons but also generally on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year. Xerophagy involves the consumption only of foods cooked in water with salt, especially grains, pulses and vegetables, as well as fruits and invertebrates, most especially crustaceans and molluscs.

The degree to which all of the fasts and specific rules of abstinence are followed by members of the Greek Orthodox Church is declining but it is worth noting that these rules are still in place and that a significant number of people do engage in fasting to some degree (Trichopoulou et al. 1998, 218). In the Roman Catholic Church, however, since 1966 required fasting has been reduced to a mere two days, namely Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and there are relatively few Roman Catholics who still voluntarily observe the traditional regulations in strict fashion. For the purposes of the discussion in the following section of this paper, we need to look back to the time when a robust set of regulations still obtained in southern Italy.

In 1906, the rules of fasting that were in effect for all of Italy (and Malta) were as follows (Palombelli 1906, 230-1):

A limitation of one full meal per day was in effect:

for all of Lent, Sundays excepted;  
on Fridays and Saturdays in Advent;  
on the Ember days;  
on the vigils of Pentecost, the Apostles Peter and Paul, the Assumption, All Saints and the Nativity;  
and for all of the above, including the Sundays of Lent, the taking of fish and meat together at the same meal was forbidden.

In addition to the above, abstinence from meat and all animal products (eggs, dairy, lard, etc.) was to be observed:

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on Ember Friday in Lent;  
Good Friday;  
the vigils of the Assumption and the Nativity.

But on the following days abstinence from animal products was limited to meat and meat-broth while eggs and dairy and animal-derived condiments (butter, etc.) were permitted:

on Fridays and Saturdays of Lent;  
on Fridays and Saturdays of Advent;  
on Ember days (other than Friday in Lent);  
on the vigils of Saint Joseph, the Annunciation, Pentecost, Apostles Peter and Paul, and All Saints.

Abstinence from meat or meat-broth but not from eggs and dairy (or animal-derived condiments) was to be observed on all other Fridays of the year.

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The general trend in the Roman Church since the Middle Ages, and especially after the Reformation, has been a gradual relaxation of the rules for fasting and abstinence, but the just-listed rules for Italy issued in 1906, which represent a response by the Church to numerous requests from the Italian bishops for mitigation, nonetheless are striking in their conservatism (Palombelli 1906, 230).<sup>5</sup> The most significant difference between these rules and those in effect in earlier times is the more liberal rule regarding the consumption of eggs and dairy, which had formerly been forbidden, broadly, for Lent, Advent, Wednesdays and Fridays in general, etc., in accordance with the precepts adumbrated most notably by Aquinas (2006, 799).

Thus, before these mitigations the Roman and Eastern Orthodox rules for abstinence from meat and all other animal products were quite similar; the most noteworthy differences in western and eastern practices involved rather the treatment of fish and olive oil. Whereas in the Roman Church, fish and olive oil were – depending upon availability – quintessential elements of the lean-day diet, in the Orthodox Church these were treated also as special foods, forbidden on basic fast-days and allowed instead only on occasions that are deemed to fall between a basic fast-day and a day with no dietary restrictions.

### The relationship between fasting and feasting

The theological underpinnings of Christian fasting and abstinence are several and there exists room for differing interpretations of what is the most important reason for dietary discipline. According to some, the primary purpose of fasting is to make the individual conscious of his or her dependence upon God and with this to evoke a sense of contrition. Fasting has also been viewed as a means of developing spiritual discipline which finds application beyond issues of the table and can be extended to control of other desires of the flesh, in particular the sexual; this conception of the role of fasting

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was especially prevalent in the past. In more recent times, greater emphasis seems to be laid upon the traditional notion of the discipline of fasting as part of a generally heightened awareness of the need to lead a pious life and in particular to shun all forms of sin and to practise good deeds, especially almsgiving. In this last regard, many people have felt that the fasting of those who in life generally have enough is an opportunity to give to those who have less and in this way it can serve as a means by which the different levels of society can be drawn together.

Christian fasting regulations clearly focus first and foremost on the consumption of meat and when that is taken into account alongside the theories of ancient and medieval medicine about the effects of different foods on the body, the old notional connection with sexual desires and their suppression makes perfect sense. Beyond that, however, meat-eating has other associations that support its special status: the association with blood and violence comes immediately to mind but, especially in the context of the Mediterranean world, where meat has historically been more often than not in short supply, an association with power and wealth. But above these is the more basic association of meat-eating with pleasure, with feelings of satiety and well-being, and with the joy of sharing in the goodness of flesh and fat in the context of sacrificial feasting on holidays, a kind of feasting that characterized Jewish practice but also the traditions of the Greek, Roman and other Mediterranean societies in which Christianity flourished early on. Finally, within the Christian context, there is the specific symbolism of Christ as the sacrificial Paschal lamb, the hunger and appreciation for which one nurtures in the extended fasts that precede Christmas and Easter, occasions that mark His birth and resurrection, which make possible the consumption of His flesh that in turn makes everlasting salvation possible. In this way, Christian abstinence from meat becomes the necessary complement to the celebration of Christ Himself.

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### **Xerophagy and abstinence from olive oil in the Orthodox tradition**

In the Roman Catholic Church, the traditional rules for abstinence can all be derived in straightforward fashion from the core notion of abstinence from meat: flesh-meat and broth made from it constitute the basic category of foods to be set aside on fast-days, with other animal products – eggs, cheese, butter – allowed on lesser fast-days but also banned on more serious occasions. The ambiguity of these products makes sense, in that they are not really flesh-meat, by any reasonable definition of the term, and yet they do derive from animals, contain animal fat and provide, moreover, a measure of satiety and pleasure akin to that derived from actual meat.<sup>6</sup> The injunction that meat and fish not be taken together at the same meal is a late (eighteenth-century) accretion to the rules directed against excess at table and still involves meat; it is then related to the long-standing call for the faithful to forego the consumption of costly or luxurious items, whatever their nature, on fast-days.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition abstinence extends, however, beyond the category of flesh-meat and other animal products.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, there is additionally

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a ban placed on the use of both wine and olive oil on the many days when the strictest abstinence is required and one is constrained to engage in xerophagy. While the question of the exclusion of wine and other alcoholic beverages is an important one deserving of detailed treatment, given limitations on space we focus here on the Orthodox abstinence from olive oil.

While there may well be a single correct explanation in terms of the reasoning of the church fathers who first decided to make abstinence from olive oil an integral part of Orthodox practice, the reason now seems to have become obscure to many and a source of speculation among some. There are three explanations which I have encountered:

1. biblical precedent: In the Old Testament, fasting on some occasions appears to involve abstinence from the use of olive oil, as in Daniel 10.2–3: 'In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.'
2. practical historical explanation: Some claim that the rule of abstinence from both olive oil and wine arose in reaction to the widespread old practice of transporting these substances in goat skins, by which the liquids became contaminated and unsuitable for strict fasting.
3. inner spiritual effect: According to some, abstinence from olive oil is necessary on the strictest days for the additional sacrifice of something inherently filling and delicious; dressing foods with oil or frying them in oil renders the fast ineffective.

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Of these, only the last is at all convincing. The first seems problematic, given that Daniel's mourning involves no mention of abstinence from the consumption of olive oil but rather only from its external use as an ointment, refreshing and beautifying. The second explanation seems perhaps plausible at first blush but leaves one wondering why, in a land such as Greece, where wine and oil are so common and have been stored since ancient times in receptacles other than just goat skins, why people would not have developed ways to avoid or work around to some degree the alleged contamination. The third of these explanations does, however, seem to ring true, in that it places the abstinence from olive oil logically in the overall scheme of Orthodox fasting, as one of the elements (along with wine) which distinguish a further intermediate level between strictest fasting and non-fasting.

There is, however, a problem with accepting the third explanation without further qualification or discussion. Whereas it works perfectly well to explain the total ban on the consumption of oils on days calling for xerophagy that one finds in some Eastern Orthodox communities, such as the Russian Orthodox, it works less well to explain the practice of the Greek Orthodox community, in which the ban on oil involves only olive oil and not other vegetable oils. And the Greek Orthodox practice looks even

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more curious if one considers that the ban on olive oil on strict fast-days does not extend to olives themselves as a food. In other words, for the Greek Orthodox, it is not something inherent about olives nor something generally about the nutritional and aesthetic qualities of vegetable oils, it is something specific about olive oil (and wine) that triggers, as it were, their exclusion from the most solemn fast-days.

It seems most reasonable to me to explain this special status of olive oil in terms of its specifically Christian use (albeit with clear Jewish antecedents) to anoint individuals in Church sacraments. And the close association of olive oil and wine in one and the same rule of abstinence makes then good sense, in that wine is also a spiritually-charged and sacramental substance. Here one notes too that the differing treatment of table olives and olive oil is exactly paralleled in the differing treatments of grapes and wine.

The question remains: why is it that the Greek Orthodox Church accords olive oil a special status which neither the Russian Orthodox nor the Roman Catholic Church does? In the case of the Russian Orthodox Church, native to a land in which the olive and olive oil are purely foreign imports and probably always only seldom used, a specific rule of abstinence from olive oil made little sense and instead the rule was interpreted in a general way, with the general spiritual effect (see explanation 3 above) uppermost in mind.

In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, the situation is rather different.<sup>8</sup> At the time Christianity established itself and became widespread in Italy, olive oil was very much a widely produced and consumed item and just as in Greece, both olive oil and wine were surely from the earliest days integral to the administration of the sacraments. But were they equally spiritually charged for the broader population of Italy as they were for the Greeks? I would say not and in the case of olive oil, the difference seems clear and makes good historical sense. For the Greeks, olive oil was from (seemingly) time immemorial a part of their culture and, indeed, given the intimate association of the olive tree and olive oil with Athena, the quintessential Greek deity, and Athens, the pre-eminent Greek city, it seems clear that both tree and oil together were elements of the Greeks' ethnic identity.<sup>9</sup> For the Italic peoples of Italy, relative to the Greeks late-comers to the Mediterranean, the olive and olive oil were consciously thought of as imports to their land, believed to have been introduced by the Greeks. And whereas the olive figures prominently in Greek myth and custom, its place in Roman religion and popular culture does indeed seem marginal or secondary in comparison. All this is not to say that olive oil was not very important to the Romans: it was highly prized and widely enjoyed, but it was not already imbued with a deeply felt spiritual worth at the time Christianity arrived in Italy, nor was it felt to be an ancient part of Roman ethnic identity, though it has become that for Italians in later times.

There seems also to be a practical aspect, itself related to culinary culture, to the differing treatment of olive oil in Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic rules of abstinence. In Greece, with its closer connexions to the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean, the use of vegetable oils other than olive oil may very well have been



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more prominent than it has been in central or southern Italy, where items such as sesame and nut oils have never been widely used. In central and southern Italy, where already in classical times the consumption of pork was relatively massive, lard has been an especially common and popular fat for cooking and seasoning (King 1999). In the context of Christian rules of abstinence, it was simple and natural to make a binary distinction in fats that coincided with the treatment of meat – when meat was proscribed, so too was lard, and the natural alternative for lean-day eating was olive oil. In Greece and the Aegean region generally, lard was also used but with the added factors of the special status of olive oil and the availability of other vegetable oils, the particular Greek Orthodox rule of abstinence pertaining to olive oil could make sense both from a spiritual and a practical standpoint.

### Conclusion

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There are a great many similarities between the cuisines of Greece on the one hand and those of central and southern Italy on the other, similarities which go well beyond the basic level of shared raw ingredients from a common physical environment and climate. Indeed, waves of strong cultural influences have repeatedly gone in both directions, bringing the cuisines of the two lands closer together. And yet, in many respects these cuisines are also quite distinct, in part thanks to differing influences from elsewhere but also in part due to differences in the rules for fasting and abstinence in these lands' religions. Though at first glance these differing rules of fasting may seem of little importance, they have a considerable impact on the actual patterns of culinary expression in the two countries throughout the year. I consider these differences, as elements of the deeply ingrained rhythm of ordinary vs. lean vs. festive days that marks both the weekly pattern of meals and the yearly calendar, to exist at a fundamental level of the culinary grammar of the respective cuisines, with cultural roots extending remarkably far into the past.

### Notes

1. *Chi vuol godere la festa, digiuni la vigilia*: an Italian proverb meaning 'He who wishes to enjoy the feast should observe the preceding fast.' This paper is intended as the first in a series of pieces exploring different aspects of the relationship between feasting and fasting. Many thanks to Amy Dahlstrom for her comments.
2. For a recent detailed discussion of the development of fasting in early Christianity and its relationship to contemporary Jewish and Græco-Roman practices, see Grimm 1996 (with extensive further references).
3. In the west, there was traditionally a distinction between 'fasting' (*ieiunus*) and 'abstinence' (*abstinentia*), a distinction not normally observed in modern English outside of Roman Church regulations. In this regard, N.B.: 'Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church made a clear distinction between the two terms: abstinence concerned the types of food eaten, irrespective of

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- quantity, whereas fasting signified a limitation on the number of meals or the amount of food taken' (*Lenten Triodion* 1977: 16–7). For a discussion of the Latin and corresponding Greek terms relating to fasting/abstinence, see Arbesmann (1929, 3ff.)
4. See 'abstinence' in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, pp. 67ff.
  5. Cf. the roughly contemporaneous abstinence rules for the United States, which are significantly more lax regarding all animal-derived foods (*Catholic Encyclopedia* 1913, 69).
  6. The question of which creatures are classified as meat and which as fish is interesting and at times amusing but it falls outside our present focus. See Parra Herrera (1935, 86–8).
  7. Aglaia Kremezi (p.c.) notes the basis of the differing treatments of fish with backbones and other seafood in Orthodox tradition is the presence/absence of blood. In the west, no such distinction is made and all creatures considered 'aquatic' are permitted as food on fast-days.
  8. Here I draw on material in Buccini (forthcoming), where there will appear extensive references to the primary and secondary literature.
  9. In Buccini (2010, 61), I suggest that oleiculture was a cultural borrowing for the Greeks from an Anatolian people and that already from the start the olive took on religious significance for them; the topic will be treated in detail in Buccini forthcoming.

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