

# Facebook as Lenten Discipline: An Orthodox Case Study

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Great Lent in the Orthodox Christian Church is the season to prepare for the celebration of Christ's passion and resurrection. For forty days, beginning on "Clean Monday" and until the Friday before Palm Sunday, observant Orthodox Christians will abstain from certain foods (most frequently meat, but also dairy products, eggs, and olive oil), attend church services more frequently (there are services scheduled for Wednesdays and Fridays, and other days throughout the period), and attend to their religious life through increased study (parishes often schedule educational lectures and retreats), prayer, and philanthropy. These practices emerged by the fifth century AD, due to the final preparation of those catechumens who would be baptized at the Paschal liturgy (Ware, 1977). Very quickly, the entire Church began to observe these practices.

Of course, not all Orthodox Christians observe these practices in full, but it is safe to say that all Orthodox Christians are at least aware that the Church is in the Lenten season and that the

Church asks them to abstain from certain foods, especially meat. Another name for Great Lent is the Great Fast. Many of the hymns of the Church throughout the season offer reminders about the Fast. They call for “repentance” and ascetic discipline in order to be ready to celebrate Easter (or Pascha, as many Orthodox call the Feast). Church messages for Great Lent often emphasize the ascetic disciplines of the season, especially the fast.

Over the last few years, clergy and others have begun preaching about restricting one’s use of technology, a “technology fast” as an ascetic Lenten discipline. With the goal of fasting and ascetic discipline during Lent being “to make us conscious of our dependence upon God” (Ware, 1977, 16), focusing on one’s interior life by limiting our attention to our electronic devices and newsfeeds to break our dependence on or even addiction to technology, even for a short period has entered a new awareness.

But are people changing their uses of technology in real ways? Is their use of technology affecting the way they observe Great Lent? The purpose of this small research project was to explore these questions.

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 very brief survey. 71 people offered to take the survey. 59 returned the survey. Two of the surveys could not be used.

The survey had three questions. Question 1 asked, "Will you change your use of Facebook or other social media sites during Great Lent?" with a follow up of "if yes, how?" The responses were about equal. 26 of the respondents said Yes; 31 said No. For those who said that they would change their use, 22 of the 31 said that they would reduce their time. Four said they would make their posts more reflective of the Lenten season. Some of the more interesting comments included:

"ignore the stuff that is out there to illicit anger."

"I have used social media more as a tool for reaching out to others about Great Lent. In my capacity as a Youth Director, 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 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, especially anything regarding Donald Trump.”

“Avoid political posts, negative (even social injustice) stories, 5 timed minutes scrolling down my page twice a day. Posting positive, edifying things.”

“Reduce my time, as I have even less discretionary time during Lent. But not qualitative changes, because I try to avoid the silly stuff already. May do a little more in trying to ‘sanctify the medium’ (as Fr. George.... Said to me). I’m amazed at how many people tell me they appreciate my postings of icons, and explanations of saints or feast days.”

I will limit my use of Facebook. I will try not to post political or even personal items. I will only post Orthodox articles and themes.”

“Installed program StayFocusd today that limits my time on social media.” (StayFocusd increases productivity by limiting the amount of time that you can spend on time-wasting websites.)

“First, I will be on less due to church services. But also, I will try to use it more as a positive influence to encourage others and less for complaining about issues/politics.”

“Every year during Lent, I post photos of Icons to mirror what is happening during that time period as well as change my profile picture and cover page during Holy Week.” I also think twice about ‘sharing’ a link depending upon what the message is.”

“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, honest,

purity, humility, peace, forgiveness, justice, mercy, wisdom, knowledge, etc.”

While Great Lent in the Orthodox Tradition begins on Clean Monday, for the three weeks before Lent begins, Orthodox enter a “pre-lenten” period that begins to raise themes associated with Lent, and eases into the fasting discipline, from a week of no fasting, a week of regular discipline, ending with on “Meat Fare Sunday,” the last day for eating meat, then a week ending (the day before Clean Monday) on “Cheese Fare Sunday” the last day for eating dairy products and the other foods typically abstained from. During these days, parishes will often hold a “Mardi Gras” type of event, filled with food and festivity, to make the contrast to the more sober Lenten period.

Question 2 explored how people posted to Facebook during this period, asking, **“Did you post anything for any of the Pre-Lenten Sundays, Meat Fare, Cheesefare, Forgiveness Vespers?”** and with a **“if Yes, what did you post?”**

The respondents were about equal. 27 of the respondents said Yes, 30 said No.

Of those who said Yes, some of the respondents said,

“Repost on fasting, clean Monday.”

“An informative post on the traditional Orthodox practices during Clean Monday, along with the traditional bread lagana.” (Lagana is a very simple flat bread of water, salt, yeast, and flour, eaten only on the first day or two of Great Lent).

“As a way to educate, remember, and to celebrate our faith.”

“I ask my FB friends for forgiveness.”

I don’t post specifically Orthodox services since I have a wide range of friends, but I do post Bible verses, the plight of those less fortunate or inspirational messages. I look at some of these services, like forgiveness vespers to be more ‘in house’ and not appropriate for the wider FB audience. Same with fasting, etc.”

“I posted ‘please forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me... Kali Sarakosti’ (Good

Lent) I also tend to post religious icons throughout Lent to mirror what is happening on that given day or week....”

The third question asked about one particular practice, associated with the evening that Great Lent begins. The Sunday before Great Lent begins (Cheese Fare) is also called Forgiveness Sunday. The Gospel lesson for that Sunday’s liturgy is the passage from Matthew (6:14-15) immediately following the teaching of the Lord’s Prayer where Christ says, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” In the evening the Vespers for Clean Monday, ushering in Great Lent, are often called “Forgiveness Vespers.” The hymns for that Vespers are rich with themes of forgiveness and repentance and the beginning of the fast. In practice, at the end of the Vespers, there is a ceremony: a circle of forgiveness. As it is practiced, the priest stands before the congregation and the faithful one by one approach him and say, “Forgive me, a sinner.” He responds to them repeating the phrase and the person takes a spot to his right, and so on. Each person in the congregation who wishes to participate in the ceremony



approaches each person in the circle until all have greeted one another with the request for forgiveness.

The survey asked if the participant attended this service. The survey then went on to ask whether or not the participant also posted a message requesting forgiveness on Facebook. They were also asked why or why not they posted a message.

Question 3, had three connected parts, **“In particular, did you post some kind of request for forgiveness for Forgiveness Sunday?”**

19 of the respondents said, Yes, 39 responded No.

**3a. Did you also attend a Forgiveness Sunday Vesper Service?**

About equal numbers, 28 attended a service, 26 did not attend a service. The responses, if any, to parts (b) and (c) were the parts of the survey I was most interested, in the attempt to determine the interplay between church attendance and social media use.

**3b. If Yes, then why did you also post a request for forgiveness on Facebook**

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

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

“My family and friends are scattered around the globe and the best way to reach as many people and for forgiveness is Facebook for me.”

“I did attend a Forgiveness Sunday Vesper Service but I did not POST a request for forgiveness from Orthodox family and friends. However, I did use messaging to Orthodox family and friends if I did not speak with them directly or text them by telephone.”

“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.”

“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. ”

### **3c. If No, then why did you post something?**

“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.”

“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.”

“I thought it was important to post material about lent in the group, POC (Progressive Orthodox Christianity). It may be that I’m just getting tired of Facebook, or too

much afraid of offending people, and that's why I don't use Facebook as much."

"No—I don't see the value of just saying 'Please forgive me' when I don't know 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."

## Discussion

Is a spiritual practice (Bass, 1997) regarding Facebook developing – the technology fast? Twenty-two of the participants, not quite 40%, said they would decrease their use of Facebook, indicating that a new practice could be emerging. Bass considers a number of factors in practices, such as being practiced together, over time, with a standard of excellence,

and the recognition that one's daily activity is tangled up with the things God is doing in the world.

While there is a well established Lenten discipline of fasting, with norms that are hundreds of years old, there is no accepted discipline surrounding 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? There does not appear to a sense that the participants were doing the fast with a community. As 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." (2011, p. 239). The responses show a more individualistic approach to the fast. While the Facebook post is an example of "social media," the way the respondents seem to be thinking about it suggests 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." (p. 281).

At a recent lecture, Nancy Ammerman (2016) suggested that the digital environment augments parish involvement. Stefan Böntert (2012, p. 293) argues the same, “Christian rituals online can supplement and expand established liturgical forms but cannot replace them.” Is this an accurate assessment? A hypothesis of my survey was that the digital environment is not augmenting parish involvement but replacing it. From the survey, even with the small sample suggests that Facebook did not replace parish participation or Lenten parish life, but did become a way of expanding them. As Böntert posits, perhaps a door has been opened to a new liturgical form.

Bontert also notes that the digital environment disembodies liturgical practice. “Most forms of embodied expression therefore disappear in online rituals.” (Bontert, 2012, 291). Some survey participants clearly noticed this difference. They recognized that the liturgical practice of asking for forgiveness lost something when done on line.

Interestingly, and also unexpected, a few respondents noticed that their Facebook post for forgiveness reached non-Orthodox as well as Orthodox Christians. As Orthodox practices tend to be closed to non-Orthodox, or at least difficult to participate in,

that a few of the respondents posts broadened their request for forgiveness, makes me ask if Facebook is broadening, or making more ecumenical, the perspectives of those who posted, as against the rather narrow or “closed” parish ritual.

With just a small sample, this is merely a case study, a field test of what could be possible. A larger sample, with demographic information would be interesting. So would asking people to monitor (or using a passive measurement tool) their Facebook usage during Lent, to measure actual practice against intent.