

Euphrosyne Rizopoulou-Egoumenidou
Demetrios Michaelides
UNIVERSITY OF CYPRUS

FASTING IN CYPRUS

The island of Cyprus has a population of around 750.000. This consists of around 70% Greek Orthodox and 18% Turkish Moslems, the rest being made up of Armenians, Maronites and Greek Catholics. The present paper will deal with the fasting habits of the Greek Orthodox population, all of which are directly associated with religion.

The Greek Orthodox Church has many days and long periods during which the believers are meant to follow a very strict fast. Keeping track of these is difficult and confusing, but in any case, nowadays, strict observance of fasting is rare except in monasteries and religious communities. In fact, a large part of the population only fasts for a few days before taking Holy Communion, mainly at Christmas and Easter. All the same, it has to be mentioned that in recent years there is a revival of religious fasting even amongst the young.

Fasting in the Greek Orthodox religion takes three forms: 1) total abstention from food and water for a couple of days; 2) total abstention from just food of any kind for a few days; and 3), which is what we will deal with in this paper, much longer periods of abstention from eating meat, eggs, milk and all other animal products. On the whole, fish and olive oil are permitted but, as will be seen, there are certain days or periods when even these are forbidden. On the same days that olive oil is forbidden, people also abstain from drinking wine, which is otherwise permitted, but not necessarily consumed, throughout the rest of the fast. It should be noted, however, that fish has always been rather scarce on the island.

The fasting days or periods are divided into the following four categories: 1) The lengthy periods before the principal feasts; 2) The days of the week when fasting has to be observed throughout the year; 3) Some special days associated with specific feasts other than the main ones; and 4) Some other

special feast days which are not fixed and become fasts if they happen to fall on certain days of the week. We will discuss each of these categories separately:

1) Main periods of fasting before the principal feasts:

There are four periods of fasting: one before Christmas, one before Easter, one before the feast day of Sts Peter and Paul; and one before the Dormition of the Virgin.

a) The first one consists of the 40 days leading up to Christmas (that is, from the 15th of November to the 24th of December) which is meant to purify and prepare the body for the coming of Christ. The day before the fast starts, which falls on the feast day of St Philip, on November 14th, is associated with great eating and feasting, since this is the last day on which animal products are permitted.

In Cyprus this period of fasting, as well as Lent, are called "Σήκωσες" from the verb "σηκάνω" which means "to lift" or "to remove", which here means the removal of forbidden food from the table. During the big fast, the Church permits the eating of fish from the 15th of November to the 17th of December, except on Wednesdays and Fridays.

b) The second, longer and more important period of fasting is Lent, that is the 49 days before Easter, beginning on Green Monday and ending on Easter Saturday. During this period, one must abstain from meat and dairy products, and even fish, although this is permitted on two specific days: on the 25th of March, Day of the Annunciation of the Virgin, and on Palm Sunday.

In Greek, Green Monday is called Clean Monday because with it starts the cleaning of body and soul. In the past, it also involved the cleaning of cooking utensils and the getting rid of all "dirty", i.e. non-fasting food. On this day, we say that we "cut the nose of" (i.e. we begin) Lent and we celebrate it with picnics in the countryside, when special fasting dishes

and an abundance of wine are consumed.

For example, certain villages prepare special "bourekia", pies or pasties filled with wild greens such as bladder campion (Silene vulgaris - "σιρουδκιά") poppies, or, when near the coast, with limpets.

There are also special customs, rites and games on this day, all of which are related to ideas of fertility, the rebirth of Nature and the coming of Spring.

One of this was the "*αρμυροκουλλούρα*" (salty bread) prepared by unmarried girls. The girls would abstain from food the whole day, sift flour backwards, that is using their left hand, knead the dough with their left, and make a flattish pastry which was cooked in a flat tile or in the "*σάτζιν*", a shallow pan, similar to a Japanese wok. At twilight, on returning home from vespers, they would cut a piece and eat it, putting the rest under their pillow, believing that during their sleep they would dream of their future husband, or, at least, of the road leading to the future husband's village.

The day before the celebration of Clean Monday is "Cheese Sunday", the end of a week during which only cheese and milk products are permitted, although, for some time now, meat is also eaten. This, of course, is the last week of Carnival and is intended as a gradual preparation of the body for the long fast which is about to begin (Paraskevopoulou 1982, 33-4). It should be noted that "Cheese Sunday" is the day after All Souls Saturday, and the main dish for it is macaroni. The dish has taken a symbolical character since the populace has associated the word "*μακαρόνια*" (makaronia) with "*μακαρκά*" (makarka), which is the celebration of the "blessed ones", that is those who have died and their sins have been forgiven. Traditionally macaroni are made of wheat flour and water, and great care was taken in their arrangement for drying before cooking. They are flavoured with grated "*χαλλούμι*", the traditional Cypriot goat or sheep cheese. "*Χαλλούμι*" is also used for the preparation of raviolis on this same day.

c) The third period of fasting is of variable duration, starting after All Saints Day, which is a moveable feast, and ending the day before the feast of Sts Peter and Paul, on June 29th. Fish can be consumed during this fast except on Wednesdays and Fridays. This fast is usually short, this is why it is popularly, and crudely, known as the "little fast of the priest's wife" (Papacharalambous 1965, 221-2).

d) The fourth and last fasting period consists of the fourteen days of August leading up to the Dormition of the Virgin on the 15th. Fish is permitted only on the 6th of August, the day of the Transfiguration (of the Saviour).

2) Fasting days throughout the year

As well as these long fasts, many people observe fasting on Wednesday and Friday throughout the year. On these days no animal products or olive oil are consumed, except during five different occasions, like the Cheese Week, mentioned already, the week after Easter etc. It used to be considered bad to knead dough and bake on Wednesdays and Fridays, and, as we will see, the preparation of olives and other pickles or preserves was also avoided.

3) Fasting on special days other than the above

During the year, there are also four of "Ἐνηροφαγία", that is the eating of dry food. These days are: the 14th September: the raising of the True Cross; Christmas Eve; the eve of Epiphany; and the 29th of August, commemorating the Beheading of St John the Baptist. On these four days one abstains from meat, dairy products, fish, olive oil and even wine, which is normally permitted during fasting. If, however, these days fall on a Saturday or Sunday, olive oil and wine are permitted. It should be noted that the onions eaten on the 29th of August, are crushed and peeled, not cut with a knife, in respect of St John who was beheaded.

4) Restrictions on special days

If certain days, which are normally associated with feasting and the consumption of meat, fall on a Wednesday or Friday, the fast is observed but fish is permitted. Such days include several feasts of the Virgin, the Birth of St John the Baptist and others (For a list of the fasts of the Greek Orthodox Church, see Kokkinou & Kophina 1986, 12-13).

Apart from the above, a believer can fast at any time in preparation for taking Holy Communion, although most people take this at the end of any of the above fasts.

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Within the restrictions mentioned above, there is a vast variety of preparations based on legumes, pulses, green vegetables and, for certain fasts, fish. One irregularity that needs to be explained is the permission of olives but the forbiddance of olive oil from most fasts. The quantity of oil in an olive is considered small and negligible, while olive oil, apart from being rich in itself, can be used for the preparation of many tasty and richly flavoured dishes which, of course, are meant to be avoided during fasts. Many fresh things are seasonal and thus change, but there are standard recipies for the preparation of fasting food. Some of these are used throughout the Greek Orthodox world. What will be discussed in the following part of the paper, however, are those used in Cyprus, and some of them exclusively so.

Flour, made from wheat or barley, constitutes the basis of many preparations. Bread in earlier, poorer times was, in any case, the main substance of nourishment of the vast majority of the population (Surridge 1930, 66). In periods of food shortage, bread was the sole source of nourishment (Report of Consul Lang of 1872 in Papadopoulos 1980, 316). Flour was and is used for the preparation of a vast variety of bread and

rusks that vary from the plainest to the more flavoured (with aromatic seeds such as sesame, nigella, terebinth seeds etc) and more elaborate (with seeds but also olives, onions and coriander for savoury preparations, and tahini, raisins and currents for sweet preparations). In the same category we can class bourgoul (crushed wheat) which, is a stable part of Cypriot diet served as an accompaniment or with sauces of meat, and which during fasts can be prepared with broken noodles, tomato, onions etc fried in vegetable oil. Another preparation in which bourgoul is used are "κολοκοτές" which are pastry pies filled with cubed red pumpkin, raisins, sugar, salt, pepper and oil, the basic ingredient of this filling being bourgoul. In more recent times, rice (mainly imported, see Papadopoulos 1980, passim [index 543]) has partly substituted bourgoul in the Cypriots' daily diet.

Bourgoul, in later times rice and as from the beginning of last century the potato, prepared in a variety of ways but without the use of animal products and fats, are standard fare as principal or accompanying dishes during fasts.

One of the most versatile seeds used for the preparation of fasting food is sesame. Widely cultivated on the island in the past, it was largely consumed, especially for the covering of breads and rusks, during Lent (Salvator (1873) 1983, 68; Ohnefalsch-Richter (1913) 1994, 127) It also has a variety of other uses, and plays an important role in Cypriot cuisine, especially during Lent. In the past sesame oil was used as a substitute for olive oil during periods when the latter is forbidden, and also simply spread on bread, but sesame was and is still widely used for the preparation of tahini and halva (Salvator ibid.). White tahini is a dip made of sesame paste beaten with water, lemon, salt and garlic, and is used for the preparation of various fasting desserts. Apart from the sweet tahini pies, "ταχινόπιττες", mentioned already, there is also white "χαλβάς", a solid, crumbly sweet made of sesame paste, and black tahini, which is a sweet paste made of sesame paste beaten with carob syrup - a great treat for children of the

past. Another fasting delicacy are "κουλουρούδκια με τερατζόμελο", little sweatmeats made of pastry of flour and water rolled into snail-like shapes ("τσεστούδκια") or folded to make scissor-like shapes ("ψαλιδούδκια").

In older days, carobs were also eaten fresh and their molasses were since early times a basic ingredient of Cypriot diet - not only during fasting periods. Cotovicus in the late 16th century says: "People take out the seed and munch the rind: they squeeze out of it also a very sweet juice, which makes an excellent condiment" (Cobham 1908, 188-9). In the early 18th century, Heyman informs us that from the fruit "is expressed a kind of juice or honey, used as a sauce in several favourite dishes" (Cobham 1908, 247). Turner in 1815 is more informative. He says that "the fruit is very sweet, and when Cyprus was Venetian it formed a branch of commerce which still continues in miniature, for the Venetians make an agreeable paste sweatmeal of the carobs, and those of Cyprus are the most esteemed" (Cobham 1908, 444).

The most common cultivated tree in the Cypriot countryside is the olive. Olives were eaten throughout the year but in particular during fasting periods, even when olive oil was not permitted. Together with bread they formed the main meal for the peasants during work in the fields. There are several ways of preparing olives the commonest being black olives with salt. Another, using a larger type of olive, is "κολυμπάτες" (swimming) in which the olives are incised and preserved in brine and vinegar flavoured with bay leaves. The characteristic Cypriot way of preparing olives is "τσακκιστές" (crushed) where the green olive is lightly crushed with a stone and preserved in brine. Before serving, they are prepared with olive oil, thin slices of lemon and lemon juice, small pieces of garlic and crushed coriander seeds. Black olives are used for making another favourite preparation, especially popular during fasts, called "ελιοτή". This is olive bread made of dough (of flour and water), onions and fresh coriander. There are many variations to this basic recipe. It should be noted that the

preparation of olives, like that of "μούγκρα" (see below) and pickles, never started on a fasting day of the week (i.e. Wednesday and Friday), or during a woman's menstruation.

The olive gives one of the basic ingredients of Cypriot diet: the olive oil. This was permitted on certain fasting periods and it was used for cooking or seasoning, mainly vegetables and pulses - but, as has already been mentioned, it is forbidden on certain periods of the fast.

Pulses were a stable of Cypriot diet and they are also a stable fasting food. Beans, lentils (both brown and yellow), broad beans, chickpeas and black-eyed beans were and still are the standard (although nowadays, other imported beans and pulses are also consumed). During fasts they are cooked with some green vegetables in several favourite combinations (beans with celery and carrot, black-eyed beans with kale, chickpeas with spinach or celery, etc). Brown lentils are cooked with rice or "τριζί" (short lengths of home-made pastry) and flavoured with onions and the frying oil. Particularly popular during fast are two soups. One is a simple soup of yellow lentils with some rice, flavoured, when permitted, with crispy fried onion (or even cloves of garlic). The other, called "ξυδκιά" (vinegary) is a lot more special. It is made with brown lentils boiled with coriander leaves, lettuce, carrot, onion and garlic. Towards the end of cooking, the soup is thickened with flour dissolved in vinegar and some liquid from the lentils. This is a special favourite during fasting for the Holy Week because of the association of vinegar with the suffering of Christ on the Cross.

Green vegetables and salads vary according to season. The island has a plentiful supply of such things. In his Report for the year 1863, Vice-Consul White says: "Cyprus is very well supplied with vegetables, the principal of which are potatoes, pumpkins, cucumbers, lettuces, tomatoes, the aubergine, cabbages, cauliflower, spinach, celery, broad beans, French-beans, lentils, onions, the "hibiscus esculentus" (which is okra or ladies fingers) and the colocasia" (Papadopoulos 1980,

84). To White's list we can also add green peas, artichokes, Jerusalem artichokes, and various wild species like cresses, artichokes, purslane, asparagus, mushrooms etc. Some of these need some further explanation. All can be eaten boiled, with the addition or not of olive oil, during fasting. The other special fasting way of preparing all these, as well as potatoes and colocasi, is to prepare them with a tomato sauce to which onion and parsley is added - but not always, as certain vegetables are better with just the tomato sauce. Boiled marrows stuffed with rice with the addition of tomato sauce are also popular.

Certain of the above-mentioned vegetables need further mention. The colocasi (*Colocasia antiquorum*), for example, has always been a standard of Cypriot diet, at least since the early Middle Ages, and in older days it played the role that potato plays today. This tuber is normally cooked with pork and celery and even quince, but during fasting it is simply boiled and eaten with olive oil and lemon, or prepared with a plain tomato sauce. The small offshoots of the large tuber, called "πούλλες" have a different flavour and treatment. They are a great favourite during fasts prepared as "αντιναχτές", which means tossed. The small tubers are deep fried and then, after the removal of excess oil, they are extinguished with lemon or wine, and then tossed in the closed sauce pan, after crushed coriander seeds have been added. Small potatoes, Jerusalem artichokes and ordinary artichokes are commonly prepared in this way.

Cyprus is considered the country of origin of the cauliflower, whence it spread, around 1600, to Genoa and the rest of Europe. (Ohnefalsch - Richter (1913) 1994, 127). It is eaten cooked with meat, but during fasts it is boiled as a salad, or prepared as "μούγκρα", a great favourite of fasting diets, and a specifically Cypriot delicacy. The cauliflower is cut into small florets, which are blanched in salty water and left to cool down. They are then mixed with unbaked bread, that

has been left to ferment and go sour, and plenty of crushed mustard seeds. The pieces with the mixture are then put into jars, and topped up with some of the liquid from the blanching of the cauliflower. After a few days, this delicious spicy pickle is ready for eating, with some olive oil added to it.

Another favourite pickle is the caper preserved in salt and vinegar. As in many other countries, the buds are pickled. In Cyprus we also preserve the fruit, which are like little gherkins, but above all, and this is an almost exclusively Cypriot speciality known since antiquity, the fresh shoots with the little leaves, buds, thorns and all.

There are of course many other vegetables and greens that are eaten and many more ways of preparing them, but we have restricted ourselves to some which are common on the island and specific to it. Before moving onto the last section about fruit and grapes in particular, we should mention that for the preparation of most fasting food, three ingredients play a leading role: lemon, onions and garlic.

Fruits and nuts are widely consumed during fasts and the variety changes from season to season and from area to area. Cyprus is famous for its fruit, and in a typical summer fare one can see water melons, sweet melons, bananas, etc. Some fruits, like apples, apricots, figs and grapes, are sundried, and these are popular during Winter fasts, because of their high calorie value. From dried figs they make "συκόπιττες", that is fig pies, flavoured with cumin, bay leaves and rosewater. Nuts and almonds are also very common and usually accompany zivania (a Cypriot eau de vie). Almonds are used to make a fine sweatmeat, crushed with sugar and rosewater, similar to but not bitter like marzipan. The green and tender fruit of the walnut, like many other fruits and even miniature aubergines, are also preserved in syrup, perfumed with cloves, cinnamon or aromatic pelargonium.

The most versatile fruit in this respect is the grape. Apart

from raisins, currants, wine and vinegar, it also gives the must which, with some treatment, is used for making various sweets. The most popular, however, is "σουτζιούκκος", made just like a wax candle. Nuts on a string are repeatedly dipped and left to dry in boiling grape juice until it gets to the thickness of a sausage. The must is also left to solidify in shallow pans and then cut into squares and left to dry in the sun and make "κιοφτέρκα", which keep for years.

Time does not allow us to mention many other preparations, which characterise the fasting diet in Cyprus. So we will end with a general consideration.

When all the fasting days and periods are put together, we find that for more than half the days of the year the Cypriot of the past had to abstain from meat and all animal products. This may sound extraordinarily severe and extreme, but the fact is that, fasting or not, the population in the past was so poor that meat and animal products were, in any case, only occasionally consumed. So, fasting was practically the normal way of life. It should be stressed that this is not something of the distant past. People who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s remember that their food consisted of bread, olives, legumes, vegetables and some milk, with eggs and meat eaten only occasionally. Even these things were in limited quantities, since we know that even the olives were counted before being put on the table.

According to Father Papaneophytos Constantinou, from the village of Statos in Paphos, the purpose of fasting is the calming of passions and spiritual uplifting. Fasting is certainly not something to boast about or make a show of - as it often is nowadays. According to the same priest, there is also a financial aspect to fasting, and the money saved from it should be given to charity.

Considering that sex is also forbidden during fasting, that is far more than half the year, this was probably also a way the Church imposed birth control on an essentially poor and often hungry population.

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