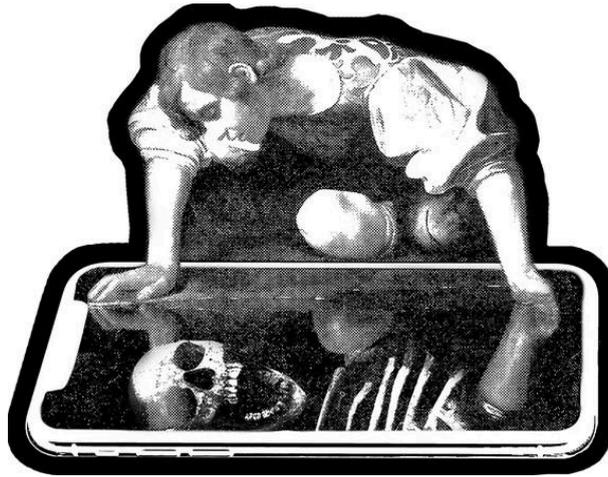


A Digital Fast - Introduction & Advice



Food is not the only thing we consume, and it's not the only thing we can fast from during the fasts prescribed by the Orthodox Church.

It's not controversial to say that we spend a lot of time online compared to only a few years ago. In the recent past there was a concept of "real life", or "IRL" (*in real life*), and our enjoyment of online content was distinguished as something that categorically wasn't part of "real life." However, it is increasingly difficult to make this distinction: if we spend a lot of time online then this **is** our real life. As so much of our life can be taken up by Internet activity, it is always worth considering what we are doing and consuming online. A fasting period gives us a particular reason to scrutinize our Internet habits.

The fasting rules for food were developed over a period of time by monastic saints, who lived in deserts and other isolated places. Without external distractions, they came to understand that certain foods (basically non-fish meat and animal products) had an effect on the body which inflamed sinful thoughts and inclinations. It's not that these foods are unclean or unhealthy (although some are), simply that our humility and repentance are better developed by restraining ourselves. Likewise, using the Internet is not inherently bad or sinful, but it is also true that certain content or platforms inhibit our prayer life.

I would therefore like to invite you to join me in a "Digital Fast" during the next fasting period. The main fasting periods of the Church are: (1) St Phillip's Fast (Nov 28 - Jan 7), (2) Lent (the 7 weeks before Pascha), (3) Apostle's Fast (2nd Monday after Pentecost - 12th July), (4) Dormition Fast (Aug 14th - 28th).

This is not to say we should stop using the Internet, which many of us need for our daily work in any case. Instead, I suggest a fast from **social media platforms**, **video hosting sites** and **Television**. A non-exhaustive list of sites or online content to fast from might include:

- **Facebook**
- **Youtube**

- **X.com** (Twitter)
- **TikTok**
- **Instagram**
- **Reddit**
- **Vimeo**
- **Streaming sites** (such as Twitch, Rumble, Kick)
- **News websites**
- **Online, mobile, or other computer games**

What most of the above examples have in common is their use of "algorithms". In this context, an algorithm is a form of artificial intelligence (AI) that suggests new content for you to consume online, tailored to what it thinks you want to see. The "Recommended Videos" in Youtube, Facebook and Twitter "feeds", and adverts on websites, are all examples of content pushed towards you by algorithms. The AI uses past browsing history, searches you make on other websites and even conversations picked up by your [smartphone's microphone](#) to make these suggestions. The aim, bluntly, is for the company to keep you on their website, and for most of us the AI knows very well what we "want" to see. However, the AI doesn't understand (or care) why we want to see something, which is why we can often find many things/stories online that make us sad, fearful, or angry. We don't enjoy seeing these things, but the algorithm knows we interact with this content regardless of how we feel, so as long as we're online, we continue to see it. A saying worth remembering, because we often don't follow it, is: ***“Do not give your heart that which does not satisfy [bring peace to] your heart” - St Pimen.***

I have not included messaging websites (including on Facebook), emails etc. because these are primarily used to talk to people we know. Socialising and staying in touch with people is certainly not something that needs to be given up during a fasting period. I also don't include watching a well-chosen DVD or individual film/documentaries as these can be very useful or edifying.

I include "Social" media in the digital fast because these platforms have changed from their original intent and using them no longer involves much socialising with people, but instead interacting with a computer that curates and feeds us other people's content.

If you want further guidance, then please do ask your parish priest.

Those of us who fast regularly and have been doing so for some time may notice that after a long fasting period, our eating habits have changed, and the things we aren't as attached to the things we long-abstained from. Perhaps it can be the same for a digital fast, and we can - for the glory of God - break some of our online habits. It would be a beautiful thing if the thumb we use to scroll a mobile phone is instead used to scroll the knots of a prayer rope.

Priest Jonathan Cowley
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