

Dear Parishioners of St. Nicholas,

As we prepare for the 40 days of Great and Holy Lent, we confront the prospect of taking more seriously our Christian ascetical life. All of us have different relationships to fasting and all of us have done more or less to observe Lent throughout our lives. I provide below a list of levels of ascetical discipline. Some of you have never fasted, even a little bit. Some of you have fasted a little, others a little more, and some a lot. As you look at the levels below, please prayerfully decide which one of them you feel you can consistently and faithfully observe. If you determine that you can maintain one of these levels by slightly modifying it, then do so. Just follow faithfully whatever it is you set out to do. Each year, try at a minimum to do what you did the previous year, and at a maximum to do something more. Also, and most important of all, please note that each of these levels includes not only a rule regarding food, but also a note about (1) attending Lenten services, and (2) treating the people around you with greater Christian friendship. Fasting is intended to soften our hearts to God and our neighbor. Without fasting, we can be decent Christians, but we cannot be as fully transformed as we are called to be as bearers of the Gospel of Christ. The most important provision of all is that we don't discuss what we do for Lent, and we don't notice what other people are or are not doing.

Level One: Fast from meat, but not from fish or dairy, on Wednesdays and Fridays during the first week of Lent and during Holy Week, but not the rest of Lent. Be generous and kind every chance you get. Avoid gossip and cruelty. Apologize to people you have wronged, and forgive those who seek your forgiveness.

Level Two: Fast from Meat, but not from fish or dairy, on Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent, and *either* every day during Holy Week *or* every day during the first week of Lent. Go to at least one Lenten service each week. Say the Lord's Prayer once a day. Be generous and kind every chance you get. Avoid gossip and cruelty. Apologize to people you have wronged, and forgive those who seek your forgiveness.

Level Three: Fast from meat, but not from fish or dairy, every day during Lent and all of Holy Week. Go to at least one Lenten service each week. Say the Lord's Prayer once a day. Be generous and kind every chance you get. Avoid gossip and cruelty. Apologize to people you have wronged, and forgive those who seek your forgiveness.

Level Four: Fast from meat, but not from fish or dairy, during all of Lent. Fast from meat, fish and dairy, during all of Holy Week. Go to at least two Lenten services each week. Say the Lord's Prayer once a day. Be generous and kind every chance you get. Avoid gossip and cruelty. Apologize to people you have wronged, and forgive those who seek your forgiveness.

Level Five: Fast from meat, fish and dairy during the first week of Lent and during all of Holy Week. Fast from meat, but not from fish or dairy, during the rest of Lent. Go to at least two Lenten services each week. Say the Lord's Prayer once a day. Be generous and kind every chance you get. Avoid gossip and cruelty. Apologize to people you have wronged, and forgive those who seek your forgiveness.

Level Six: Fast from meat, fish and dairy during all of Lent and Holy Week, but NOT on weekends during Lent. Go to at least two Lenten services each week. Say the Lord's Prayer once a day. Be generous and kind every chance you get. Avoid gossip and cruelty. Apologize to people you have wronged, and forgive those who seek your forgiveness.

Level Seven: Fast from meat fish, olive oil and dairy during all of Lent and Holy Week. Go to all Lenten services each week. Say the Lord's Prayer once a day. Be generous and kind every chance you get. Avoid gossip and cruelty. Apologize to people you have wronged, and forgive those who seek your forgiveness.