In 2003 Orthodox Christians throughout the world who observed their church’s prescriptions on fasting and abstinence, were expected to abstain from meat for 182 days – 195 actually if they followed the Julian Calendar, just a fraction less than half the year or a dozen days longer respectively – and during that period, except for seven days, to abstain also from dairy products, while they would be allowed to partake of scaled fish for thirty-seven of those days. Finally, on twenty-one of those days during which they could not partake of foods in the three previously mentioned categories, they would also abstain from oil and wine. The number of fasts varies each year, according to the date on which the Paschal festival falls.

This, by any account, is a pretty severe diet, especially if one were to take into account the additional rules of fasting on some of those days. The latter would entail eating less of the allowed food and having fewer meals than normal.

These regulations, designed for the spiritual and physical benefit of faithful Orthodox Christians, although initiated in the pre-Byzantine period of church history were certainly developed and formulated during ‘Byzantine’ days proper, during the forging of the eastern Roman Empire, when the dominion of the autokrator, the faithful Basileus of the Romans, extended to the entire Balkan peninsula, much of the Near East and part of the Middle East, Egypt till the seventh century, south Italy and even parts of Spain and north Africa for a while,¹ not forgetting, of course, the Chersonese on the north coast of the Black Sea, a portion of which it clung to till the end.²

Were you to think that such abstinence and/or fasting for half a year might constitute a tough proposition, think again. For, depending upon the day on which the Paschal Feast (Resurrection Sunday) is celebrated – it being a movable feast – up to another twenty-one days may have to be added to the figure, bringing the figure to 203 or, in the case of those who still cling to the Old Julian calendar such as the Russian Orthodox, as many as thirty-four days, thus bringing the possible final tally to 216 days of abstinence from meat and dairy products in a year. One is

¹ This was a process of continuous contraction or expansion over its 1,000-year-old existence.
² Constantine XI Palaeologus was offering the latter as an inducement to western princes to extend to him their assistance in his desperate attempt to defend Constantinople against Mahomet II.

tempted to speculate as to whether the church fathers responsible for this legislation possessed some medical and dietary prescience, acquired without the benefit of the research carried out in our times.

It is true that fasting as such is encountered in pre-Christian times, in the old testamentary period and even in some pagan cults; however, this factor did not determine the evolution of Christian fasting and abstinence, just as the existence of some forms of monasticism in pre-Christian Judaism and oriental asceticism in pagan cults had no bearing on Christian monastic life, as the late Professor Panayiotis Christou pointed out in his treatise “The monastic life in the Eastern Orthodox Church”. 3

St John the Baptist’s reliance on wild honey and locusts and the feeding of the wandering Jews in the desert with ‘manna’ may be viewed as a primitive form of abstinence on the principle of “eat only when in need and what you can find”. Moses had fasted for forty days and nights (Exod 34:28). Jesus Christ too fasted for forty days and nights (Matt 4:2, Lk 4:1-2), though we are not given much data by the gospels on his ordeal.

There are other references in them to fasting, as for example when the great Nazarene, as recorded in Matt 6:16-18, castigates those who would adopt a sad countenance during their fasting, instead of a joyful one stemming from a rewarding spiritual exercise. Fasting is certainly associated with great figures of the Old Testament other than Moses: Daniel, Esther and Zechariah, to mention but some. The latter’s celebrated verse in the homonymous book of the Old Testament (8:19) is known only too well to exegetai and devotees.

Granted the existing practice of some forms of fasting by the Hebrews, it was the Christian church, however, which initiated and developed Christian, eventually Byzantine Christian fasting. As early as the first recorded canons of the church, those known as the Apostolic Canons – irrespective of their chronological origins and dating – certain basic rules were laid down. The sixty-ninth Apostolic Canon confirmed largely established fasting practices; canon 63 imposed severe sanctions for consuming unclean meat. This was only a repetition of the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem, held in 49 CE and as outlined in Acts 15:9. Other councils followed suit, 4 also promulgating appropriate regulations on fasting and abstinence.

4 Canon 67 of the Quinisext and by implication canon 2 of the regional Council of Gangra in Paphlagonia (340 CE); see ΠΙΘΑΝΟΝ (The Rudder) with commentary by the hieromonk Dorotheos and the monk Nikodemus, 9th edn, by the Most Rev. Metropolitan Panteleimon of Corinth (Athens 1982).