



Simple Catechesis Drawn From the Experience of the Orthodox Church



The Forty-Day Fast Before Christmas

November 15

to

December 24

22

Offered as a Blessing
for Edification and Consolation
September 2022



The Forty-Day Fast Before Christmas

November 15 - December 24

I. Preamble

1. The forty-day Fast before Christmas (November 15-December 24) developed gradually and by analogy with the Fast of Great Lent prior to Pascha, but is later and less strict.¹

2. Throughout its duration:²

- on Wednesdays and Fridays (as well as Mondays—for monastics) a strict fast is kept; that is, oil and wine are not permitted (in other words, xerophagy is prescribed).³

- on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays **only** oil and wine are permitted.⁴

- on Great Feasts (see ch. 3), if they fall on a Wednesday or a Friday, **only** oil and wine are permitted.⁵

3. With regard to the consumption of fish, the following rules prevail:

- During the first week (November 15-20), which corresponds to Clean Week in Great Lent, fish **is not** permitted.⁶

- On November 21, the Entrance of the Theotokos, in addition to oil and wine, fish is permitted, on whatever day it falls.⁷

4. For the remainder of the period from November 22 through December 24, there are two parallel traditions:⁸ **the one more lenient (4.1) and other stricter (4.2)**, as follows:

4.1. The more lenient tradition:

- from November 22 through December 17, on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, in addition to oil and wine, fish is permitted;⁹
- from December 18 through December 24, a week which corresponds to Great Week before Pascha, fish is **not** permitted.

4.2. The stricter tradition:

- from November 22 through December 12 fish is permitted **only** on Saturdays and Sundays;¹⁰
- from December 13 through December 24 fish is **not** permitted.

5. A spiritual Father or confessor is to apply the strict or the lenient regimen of the Fast in proportion to the spiritual and physical capacities of the believer, in accordance with charitable discretion and pastoral responsibility and in conformity with the directions of his Bishop.^{11,12}

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II. Detailed Guidelines



A. The more lenient regimen

November 15-20:

- **W**ednesdays and **F**ridays: strict fast (xerophagy).
- **T**uesdays, **T**hursdays, **S**aturdays, and **S**undays: only oil and wine are permitted.

November 21:

- **I**n addition to oil and wine, fish is permitted (on whatever day it falls).

November 22 - December 17:

- **W**ednesdays and **F**ridays: strict fast (xerophagy).
- **T**uesdays, **T**hursdays, **S**aturdays, and **S**undays: in addition to oil and wine, fish is permitted.

December 18-24:

- **W**ednesdays and **F**ridays: strict fast (xerophagy).
- **T**uesdays, **T**hursdays, **S**aturdays, and **S**undays: only oil and wine are permitted.

December 24 (Eve of the Nativity):

- **Strict fast (xerophagy).**
- **If it falls on a Saturday or a Sunday: only oil and wine are permitted.¹³**

B. The stricter regime

November 15-20:

- **Wednesdays and Fridays: strict fast (xerophagy).**
- **Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays: only oil and wine are permitted.**

November 21:

- **In addition to oil and wine, fish is permitted (on whatever day it falls).**

November 22 - December 12:

- **Wednesdays and Fridays: strict fast (xerophagy).**
- **Tuesdays and Thursdays: only oil and wine are permitted.**
- **Saturdays, and Sundays: in addition to oil and wine, fish is permitted.**

December 13-24:

- **Wednesdays and Fridays: strict fast (xerophagy).**
- **Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays: only oil and wine are permitted.**

December 24 (Eve of the Nativity):

- **Strict fast (xerophagy).**
- **If it falls on a Saturday or a Sunday: only oil and wine are permitted.**

† December 25 (Nativity):

- **Foods of all kinds are permitted (on whatever day it falls).¹⁴**



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III. Great Feasts

If they fall on Wednesdays or Fridays

November

16 St. Matthew the Apostle: oil and wine are permitted.

21 Entrance of the Theotokos: in addition to oil and wine, fish is permitted (on whatever day it falls).

25 St. Catherine the Great Martyr: oil and wine are permitted.

30 St. Andrew the Apostle: oil and wine are permitted.

December

4 St. Barbara the Great Martyr: oil and wine are permitted.

5 St. Sabbas the Sanctified: oil and wine are permitted.

6 St. Nicholas of Myra: oil and wine are permitted.

9 St. Anna, mother of the Theotokos: oil and wine are permitted.

12 St. Spyridon the Wonderworker: oil and wine are permitted.

15 St. Eleutherios the Hieromartyr: oil and wine are permitted.

17 St. Daniel and the Three Youths: oil and wine are permitted.

20 St. Ignatios the God-Bearer: oil and wine are permitted.

24 Eve of the Nativity: strict fast (except on Saturdays and Sundays).

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IV. Liturgical Typika

“According to the Liturgical Typika, with regard to the end of the period when fish may be eaten during the forty-day Nativity Fast, two traditions are recorded.

- According to the Studite Typikon, fish may be eaten until December 17.

- According to an equally ancient tradition, more in line with the Typikon of St. Sabbas, which is preserved by the Holy Monastery of St. Dionysios on the Holy Mountain, fish may be eaten until the Feast of St. Spyridon.

- In both cases the rationale is the same: the emphasis of the prefestal hymnography on the event of the Great Dominical Feast of the Nativity of Christ.”¹⁵

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V. The Canonical Authority of Bishops

The potential for discretion is mentioned

- both by St. John of Damascus, who explicitly emphasizes that in questions of fasting, “we should obey...those who have been entrusted with leadership and with stewardship of the word,”¹⁶

- and by the Permanent Synod convened under Patriarch Luke Chrysoverges of Constantinople (twelfth century), which codified the Nativity Fast (and that of the Dormition of the Theotokos) and which furnished local Orthodox Bishops with very broad canonical authority in the application of ecclesiastical œconomy, whenever the need might arise:

“If we are compelled to relax fasting on account of bodily infirmity, the prescribed days of the Fast may be shortened at the behest of the Bishop; for this, too, has been decreed on the basis of unwritten Church Tradition.”¹⁷

If a Hierarch has not publicly announced in advance, in the region of his jurisdiction, or a serving Priest to his parish, the order of fasting to be observed during the forty-day period of the Nativity Fast, especially with regard to whether everyone is or is not permitted to eat fish on Tuesdays and Thursdays until December 17, the faithful should consult their spiritual Fathers concerning this matter and should put their instructions into practice with confidence, as the Saints enjoin: “Do nothing without the Bishop.”¹⁸

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VI. “Three Fasts have been prescribed among us as a type of the Life-Originating Trinity”¹⁹

Three Prescribed Fasting Periods

- **First period.** The first, therefore, is that of the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, which would be understood as a type of the Father, as He knows Whose good pleasure was the Conception and Nativity of the Son....

- **Second period.** The second after this, which is called the Great

Fast, would be a type of the Only-Begotten, which He Himself manifestly indicated, doing this for three years after His ascent from Baptism....

• **Third period.** The third after this, which is proclaimed by some of the [Holy] Apostles, would be a type of the Life-Creating Spirit, Who taught the Apostles all things in which He had been initiated by the Father and the Son....



† Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle
January 1, 2022 (Old Style)

† Circumcision of the Lord and St. Basil the Great

1. See (i) St. Anastasios of Antioch, PG 89:1389-1398; G. Rallis and M. Potlis (eds.), *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν Κανόνων* [Compendium of the Divine and Sacred Canons] (Athens: G. Chartophylax, 1852-1859), Vol. IV, pp. 580-584;

(ii) St. Theodore the Studite, PG 99:1693-1696;

(iii) Nikon the Monk, PG 127:525D-528A; Rallis and Potlis, *Σύνταγμα*, Vol. IV, p. 591;

(iv) “Τόμος Ἐνώσεως” [“Tome of Union”] (920), in Rallis and Potlis, *Σύνταγμα*, Vol. V, p. 8.

(v) Theodore Balsamon (Patriarch of Antioch), PG 138:941A-D, 1001A-C, 1335-1360; Rallis and Potlis, *Σύνταγμα*, Vol. IV, p. 419-421, 488, 565-579;

(vi) St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, *Ἱερὸν Πηδάλιον* [The Rudder], pp. 93-94 (note on the Sixty-ninth Apostolic Canon), pp. 387ff. (note on the Third Canon of the Synod of Neocæsarea), and p. 728 (note on the Nineteenth Canon of St. Nicephoros the Confessor);

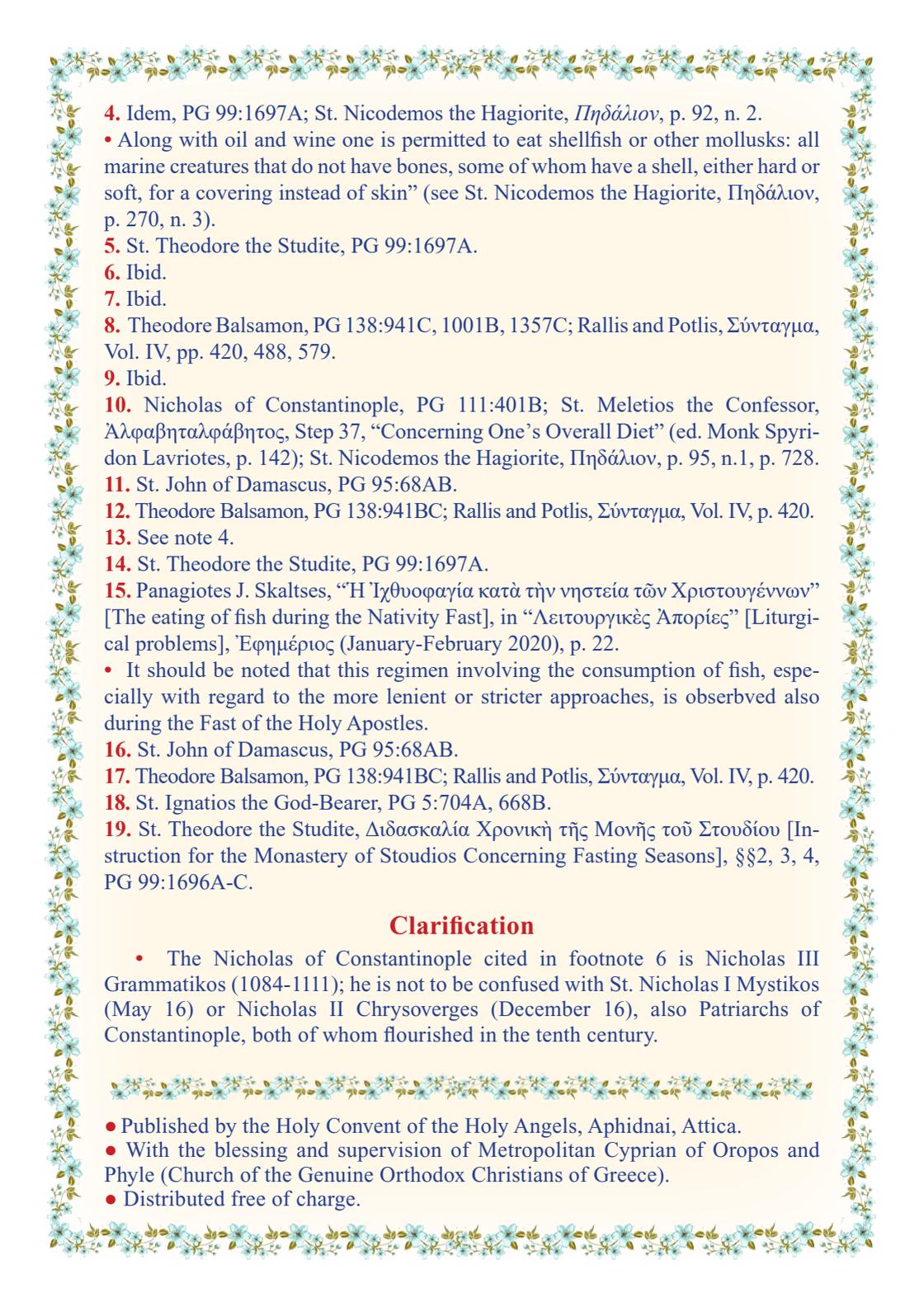
(vii) Peter Moghila (Metropolitan of Kiev), *Orthodox Confession*, Part I: Question/Answer 88, in Ioannes Karmires (ed), *Δογματικά καὶ Συμβολικά Μνημεῖα τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας* [Dogmatic and Credal Statements of the Orthodox Catholic Church] (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck u. Verlagsanstalt, 1968), Vol. II, p. 632.

2. St. Theodore the Studite, PG 99:1696D.

3. Idem, PG 99:1696C, 1700C.

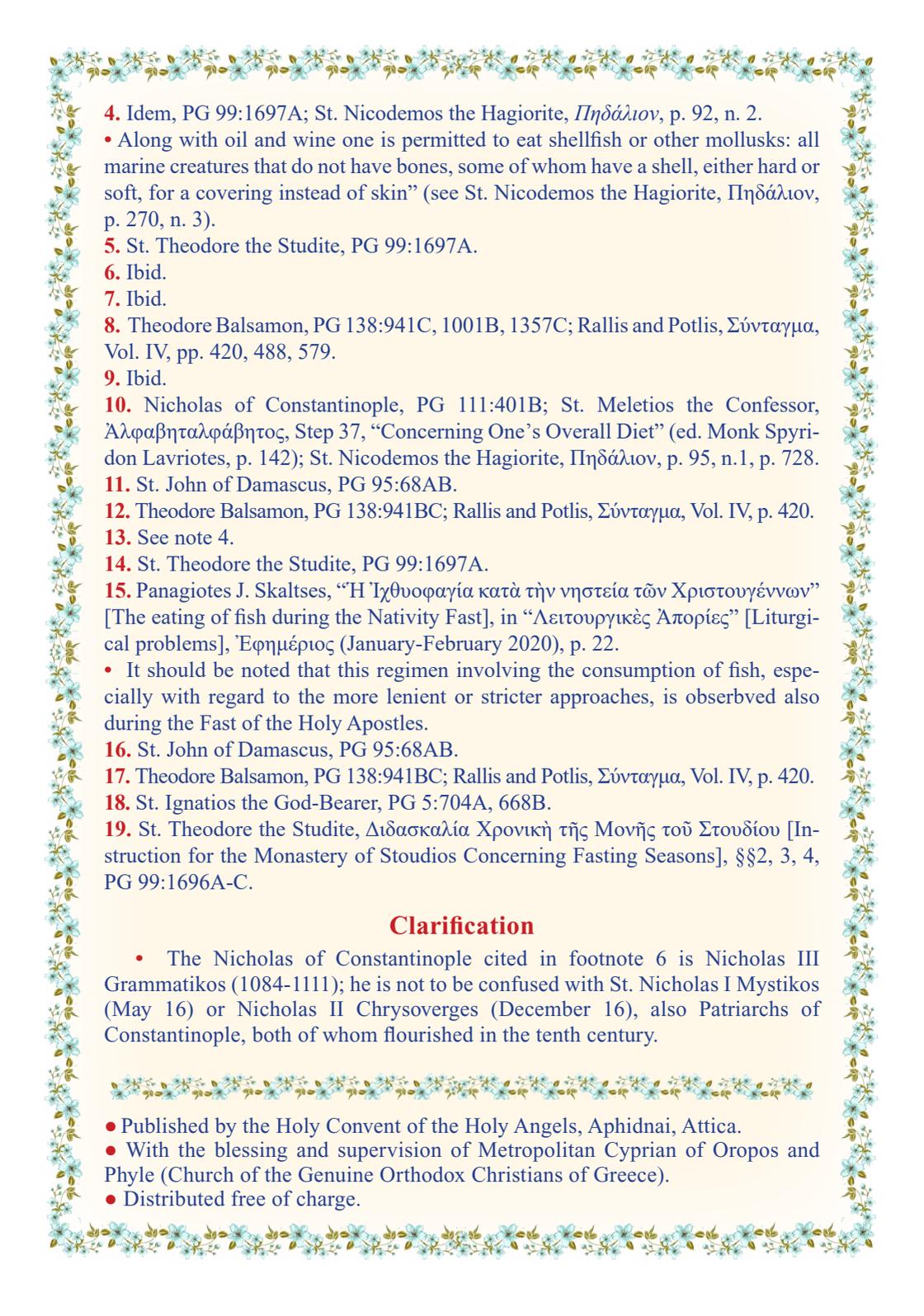
• According to the ancient order, the Nativity Fast lasted only seven days (December 18-24).

• Xerophagy: “Xerophagy is for one to eat once a day at the ninth hour [3 p.m.], without consuming olive oil or drinking wine,” “using only bread and water” (St. John Chrysostomos); “come the ninth hour, eating alone and xerophagy”; “for one not to taste any food at all until the evening” (see St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, *Πηδάλιον*, p. 94).

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4. Idem, PG 99:1697A; St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, *Πηδάλιον*, p. 92, n. 2.
 - Along with oil and wine one is permitted to eat shellfish or other mollusks: all marine creatures that do not have bones, some of whom have a shell, either hard or soft, for a covering instead of skin” (see St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, *Πηδάλιον*, p. 270, n. 3).
 5. St. Theodore the Studite, PG 99:1697A.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Theodore Balsamon, PG 138:941C, 1001B, 1357C; Rallis and Potlis, *Σύνταγμα*, Vol. IV, pp. 420, 488, 579.
 9. Ibid.
 10. Nicholas of Constantinople, PG 111:401B; St. Meletios the Confessor, *Αλφαβηταλάβητος*, Step 37, “Concerning One’s Overall Diet” (ed. Monk Spyridon Lavriotes, p. 142); St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, *Πηδάλιον*, p. 95, n.1, p. 728.
 11. St. John of Damascus, PG 95:68AB.
 12. Theodore Balsamon, PG 138:941BC; Rallis and Potlis, *Σύνταγμα*, Vol. IV, p. 420.
 13. See note 4.
 14. St. Theodore the Studite, PG 99:1697A.
 15. Panagiotēs J. Skaltsēs, “Ἡ Ἰχθυοφαγία κατὰ τὴν νηστεία τῶν Χριστουγέννων” [The eating of fish during the Nativity Fast], in “Λειτουργικὲς Ἀπορίες” [Liturgical problems], *Ἐφημέριος* (January-February 2020), p. 22.
 - It should be noted that this regimen involving the consumption of fish, especially with regard to the more lenient or stricter approaches, is observed also during the Fast of the Holy Apostles.
 16. St. John of Damascus, PG 95:68AB.
 17. Theodore Balsamon, PG 138:941BC; Rallis and Potlis, *Σύνταγμα*, Vol. IV, p. 420.
 18. St. Ignatios the God-Bearer, PG 5:704A, 668B.
 19. St. Theodore the Studite, *Διδασκαλία Χρονικὴ τῆς Μονῆς τοῦ Στουδίου* [Instruction for the Monastery of Stoudios Concerning Fasting Seasons], §§2, 3, 4, PG 99:1696A-C.

Clarification

- The Nicholas of Constantinople cited in footnote 6 is Nicholas III Grammatikos (1084-1111); he is not to be confused with St. Nicholas I Mystikos (May 16) or Nicholas II Chrysoverges (December 16), also Patriarchs of Constantinople, both of whom flourished in the tenth century.

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