

Fasting and Abstinence in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Fasting and abstinence (Ge'ez: ጸግም ṣōm; Amharic: tsom) have historically constituted a major element of the practice of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, following the counsel of Saint Paul (Ge'ez: ቅዱስ ጳውሎስ; k'idus p'awilos) to "chastise the body and bring it under subjection" per 1 Corinthians 9:27. It is generally agreed, and asserted by the Church itself, that the fasting regime of the Ethiopian Church is the strictest of any Church, with 180 mandatory fasting days for laypeople and up to 252 days for clergy and the particularly observant. The general list of fasts are laid out in the Fetha Negest.

Fasting Regimen

During fasts, the observant are required to partake in no more than one meal a day, which is to be eaten in the afternoon or evening. Fasting involves abstention from animal products (meat, dairy, and eggs), and refraining from eating or drinking before 3:00 pm. Ethiopian devotees may also abstain from sexual activity and the consumption of alcohol.

Foods

As the fasting regimen prohibits the consumption of meat, dairy, and eggs, Ethiopian cuisine contains many dishes that can be considered vegan. Legumes such as split peas (ክክ, kək or kikki) and lentils (ግሥር, mäsər or birsin); or vegetables such as potatoes (ድንች, Dənəch), carrots and chard (ቆስጥ) are common in fasting dishes. Shiro wat (Amharic: ሽሮ ወጥ), made from ground chickpeas, is also particularly popular as a fasting food.

As international cuisines have grown in popularity among the Ethiopian middle class, fasting variants have also developed to meet the needs of the observant population—among

which include fasting pizza, fasting pasta, fasting pastries, and fasting (meatless) burgers.

Another example of Western influence is the popularity of fish goulash (Amharic: አሣ ጉላሽ; asa gulaš), often made with local Nile perch, tilapia, or catfish.

Observance

Observance of the fasting periods have fluctuated with time. Today, religious groups like Mahibere Kidusan encourage the faithful to rigorously observe both obligatory and optional fasting periods. As a result, strict observance of fasts is said to be growing in certain Orthodox communities.

List of Fasts

Ordinary Fasts

Every Wednesday and Friday throughout the year are observed as fast days except during the fifty days after Easter, Wednesday in observance of the decision of the Sanhedrin, in collaboration with Judas Iscariot, to betray and kill Jesus before the feast of Pesach, and Friday in observance of the Passion of Jesus.

Seven Official Canonical Fasts:

- The Fast of Great Lent (Ge'ez: ዐብይ ጳጳስ; ābiyi ts'om) lasts for eight weeks (rather than five, as in the Chalcedonian churches), or 55 continuous days before Easter (Fasika). The fast is divided into three separate periods: Tsome Hirkal, Tsome Arba, and Tsome Himamat.
- The Apostles' Fast begins the Monday following Pentecost and ends on the 4th of Hamle; the duration varies between 10 and 40 days.

- The Fast of Assumption of the Holy Virgin, 15 days.
- The Fast of the Prophets Advent Fast, 40 days.
- The Fast of (gahad)/ If Christmas or Timket (Theophany) fall on a Wednesday or a Friday, then the obligatory Wednesday/Friday fast is observed on the eve.
- The Fast of Nineveh, three days before Lent.
- The Fast of Wednesdays and Fridays, in observance of the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ.

Optional Fasts

Many faithful also observe optional fasts not included in the official list. These include ጸጌ ጸግጦ (the Fast of the Flowers) and the fast of Puagumen in preparation for the Ethiopian New Year on Meskerem 1.