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Life in the Fast Lane

Why Catholics Abstain

Issue: Why do Catholics fast? What did Jesus teach about fasting? Is fasting still an obligation for Catholics?

Response: Fasting is a "spiritual exercise" by which we repent of our sins and strive to become more Christ-like as sons and daughters of God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1438, 2043; cf. Rom. 8:14-17). While Jesus cautioned against prideful fasting (Mt. 6:1-5, 16-18), He Himself fasted (Lk. 4:1-2) and encouraged others to do so to advance His Kingdom (Mt. 17:21). From her inception, the Church has followed Christ's example regarding fasting. She continues to require the faithful to fast and abstain on prescribed days during Lent.

Discussion: The Church encourages fasting, prayer and almsgiving above all other forms of penance (Catechism, no. 1434; cf. 1438-39). The purpose of penance is not self-exaltation (Mt. 6:1-5) but interior conversion and transformation of life. "Rend your hearts, not your garments," summarizes the prophet Joel in the Church's Ash Wednesday reading (Joel 2:13). The prophet Isaiah elaborates on "acceptable" fasting (Is. 58:1-12)—acts of charity that "will cover a multitude of sins" (Jas. 5:20; 1 Pet. 4:8).

While fasting is frequently associated with Lent and penance (Catechism, nos. 1438-39), it should be part of our ongoing spiritual exercises. Our Lord calls us to seek perfection through the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, according to our state in life (Mt. 19:16-29; Catechism, nos. 2052-53; cf. Mt. 5:48). Though He was infinitely righteous as God, Christ the God-man fasted and prayed to prepare for His encounter with the devil in the desert (Lk. 4:1-13). We too are called to prepare for and engage in this battle for the Kingdom (Eph. 6:10-20).

As we grow in righteousness through fasting, we are better able to work out our own salvation (Phil 2:12-13) and intercede for others: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation" (2 Cor. 1:5-6; cf. Col. 1:34). In recognition of ancient tradition, the early Church leaders prayed and fasted in commissioning St. Paul and Barnabas (Acts. 13:2-3; see also: 14:23).

Though fasting involves abstinence, the Church makes a distinction between fasting and abstinence; abstinence itself involves foregoing only certain foods. Weekly fasts and abstinence from certain foods, especially "flesh meats,"[1] were established early in the Church. As recorded in the *Didache*, a second-century document which conveys the teaching of the first Apostles (cf. Acts 2:42), Christians were instructed by their pastors to practice fast and abstinence:

> "Bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies: fast for those who persecute you. . . . Do not let your fasts be with the hypocrites. They fast on Monday and Thursday; but you shall fast on Wednesday and Friday" (*Didache* 1:1, 8:1).

In order to commemorate the Passion and death of Christ in the early Church, observance of Friday abstinence was a common practice for both the Eastern and Western Church.[2] Abstinence in the early Church meant refraining from flesh meat and all meat products, including milk, eggs and milk products. Fish or mollusks were not considered a type of meat and therefore did not come under the prohibition of abstinence.[3]

In his 1966 Apostolic Constitution on Penance, Pope Paul VI reorganized ecclesiastical discipline with regard to fasting and abstinence. He declared all Fridays and Ash Wednesday as obligatory days of penance. Abstinence was to be

observed on every Friday that did not fall on a holy day of obligation, and fast as well as abstinence was required on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. He further declared that, for just cause, bishops' conferences could transfer the days of penance, always taking into account the Lenten season. In this way, he empowered bishops' conferences to substitute abstinence and fast wholly or in part with other forms of penance and especially works of piety and charity.

Following Pope Paul VI's directives, the U.S. Bishops decreed norms for U.S. Catholics in their November 1966 statement on penance.[4] The bishops maintained the traditional law of fast and abstinence on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstinence from meat on the Fridays of Lent.[5] They also rescinded the traditional law of abstinence under pain of sin for other Fridays. However, in accord with Pope Paul VI's directives and Canon, no. 1249, the U.S. faithful must do some sort of penance on every Friday, excluding Solemnities or a dispensation by their diocesan bishop. Abstinence from flesh meat maintained its primary place among recommended works of self-denial and personal penance from which the faithful may choose. Following are the condensed highlights of the U.S. Bishops' 1966 statement, which the Bishops reaffirmed in 1991:

> 1. Friday remains a special day of penitential observance throughout the year, a time when those who seek perfection will be mindful of their personal sins and the sins of mankind, which they are called upon to help expiate in union with Christ Crucified;
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> 2. Friday should be in each week something of what Lent is in the entire year. For this reason, we urge all Catholics to prepare for that weekly Easter that comes with each Sunday by freely making of every Friday a day of self-denial and mortification in prayerful remembrance Christ's Passion;
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> 3. The traditional law of abstinence as binding under pain of sin, as the sole prescribed means of observing Friday, is hereby terminated as the sole means of observing Friday. Among the works of voluntary self-denial and personal penance which we especially commend to our people for the future observance of Fridays, abstinence from flesh meat has first place. The bishops do so in the hope that the Catholic community will ordinarily continue to abstain from meat by free choice as we formerly did in obedience to Church law. Our expectation is based on the following considerations:
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> a. We shall thus freely and out of love for Christ Crucified show our solidarity with the generations of believers to whom this practice frequently became, especially in times of persecution and of great poverty, no mean evidence of fidelity to Christ and His Church.
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> b. We shall thus remind ourselves that as Christians, although immersed in the world and sharing its life, we must preserve a saving and necessary difference from the spirit of the world. Our deliberate, personal abstinence from meat, more especially because no longer required by law, will be an outward sign of inward spiritual values that we cherish.

The U.S. Bishops also emphasized that, while doctrine or teaching may not change, disciplinary activities like fasting may change, given the power to bind and loose as conferred by Christ on Peter and the other apostles (Mt. 16:18-19; 18:16-18):

> Every Catholic Christian understands that the [disciplinary] fast and abstinence regulations admit of change, unlike the commandments and precepts of that unchanging divine moral law which the Church must today and always defend as immutable. This said, we emphasize that our people are henceforth free from the obligation, traditionally binding, under pain of sin in what pertains to Friday abstinence, except as noted above for Lent. We stress this so that no scrupulosity will enter into examinations of conscience, confessions or personal decisions on this point.

In their May 1983 pastoral, *The Challenge of Peace*, the U.S. Bishops encouraged prayer, penance, fasting and almsgiving for the sake of peace. Catholics United for the Faith (CUF) urges the Catholic faithful to respond generously in maintaining the penitential character of each Friday. Christ calls us to seek those things which are above (Col. 3:1-2)—His Kingdom and His righteousness (Mt. 6:33)—so that we may become more truly like Him: "Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sin" (1 Pet. 4:8). This is the fasting to which God calls us, "a day acceptable to the Lord" (Is. 58:5; cf. Jn. 6:27).

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1 Flesh meat typically refers to non-marine animals, such as cows and chickens.

2 See St. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 6:75; Tertullian, *De jejunio*, 14.

3 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1967, p. 848.

4 National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), *Pastoral Statement of the NCCB on Penitential Observance for the Liturgical Year*, Nov. 18, 1966.

5 The law of fasting binds Catholics ages 18 through 59. The law of abstinence binds those who are 14 and older (Code of Canon Law, no. 1252).

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