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Pamphlet 271

Rules of Fasting and Abstinence

1) *Abstinence:*

No meat is eaten on days of abstinence. Days of Abstinence are every Friday in Lent, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Everyone 14 and older are bound to abstain from meat on days of abstinence (invalids, pregnant and nursing mothers are exempt).

2) *Fasting:*

Fasting means having only one full meal to maintain one's strength. Two smaller meatless and penitential meals are permitted according to one's needs, but they should not equal the one full meal. Eating solid foods between meals is not permitted.

Days of fasting are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Everyone from 18 but not yet 60 years of age are bound to the law of fasting (again, invalids, pregnant and nursing mothers are exempt).

3) *Friday Abstinence Outside of Lent:*

It should be noted that Fridays throughout the year are *designated days of penance*. The *Code of Canon Law* states that Friday is a day of abstinence from meat throughout the year. The American Bishops have allowed us to choose a different form of penance rather than abstaining from meat, but there must be some form of penance, for this is the day we commemorate Christ's suffering and death. The bishops stress that "[a]mong the works of voluntary self-denial and

personal penance...we give first place to abstinence from flesh meat" (*Pastoral Statement on Fasting and Abstinence*).

Why Fasting and Abstinence?

We are required by Church law to observe the prescribed days of fasting and abstinence, which is the fifth precept of the Church. Today, the regulations are not as prohibitive. In 1966, Pope Paul VI issued his Apostolic Constitution on Penance, *Paenitemini*, which states:

The time of Lent preserves its penitential character. The days of penitence to be observed under obligation throughout the Church are all Fridays and Ash Wednesday, that is to say the first days of "*Grande Quaresima*" (Great Lent), according to the diversity of the rite. Their substantial observance binds gravely.

[A]bstinence and fast are to be observed on Ash Wednesday or, according to local practice, on the first day of 'Great Lent' and on Good Friday.

1. The law of abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, the products of milk or condiments made of animal fat.
2. The law of fasting allows only one full meal a day, but does not prohibit taking some food in the morning and evening, observing—as far as quantity and quality are concerned—approved local custom.

To the law of abstinence those are bound who have completed their 14th year of age. To the law of fast those of the faithful are bound who have completed their 18th year and up until the beginning of their 60th year. As regards those of a lesser age, pastors of souls and parents should see to it with particular care that they are educated to a true sense of penitence.

The United States Bishops issued their document *On Penance and Abstinence* the same year to give the US Catholics spiritual guidelines in implementing the directives in *Paenitemini*:

Wherefore, we ask, urgently and prayerfully, that we, as people of God, make of the entire Lenten season a period of special penitential observance. Following the instructions of the Holy See, we declare that the obligation both to fast and to abstain from meat, an obligation observed under a more strict formality by our fathers in the faith, still binds on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. No Catholic Christian will lightly excuse himself from so hallowed an obligation on the Wednesday which solemnly opens the Lenten season and on Friday called "Good" because on that day Christ suffered in the flesh and died for our sins.

In keeping with the letter and spirit of Pope Paul's constitution *Paenitemini*, we preserve for our dioceses the tradition of abstinence from meat on each of the Fridays of Lent, confident that no Catholic Christian will lightly hold himself excused from this penitential practice.

The US Bishops not only reinforce the fasting and abstinence guidelines, they give recommendations on how to continue this spirit of Lent throughout the 40 days:

For all other weekdays of Lent, we strongly recommend participation in daily Mass and a self-imposed observance of fasting. In the light of grave human needs which weigh on the Christian conscience in all seasons, we urge particularly during Lent, generosity to local, national, and world programs of sharing of all things needed to translate our duty to penance into a means of implementing the right of the poor to their part in our abundance. We also recommend spiritual studies, beginning with the Scriptures as well as the traditional Lenten devotions (sermons, Stations of the Cross, and the Rosary) and all the self-denial summed up in the Christian concept of "mortification."

Let us witness to our love and imitation of Christ, by special solicitude for the sick, the poor, the underprivileged, the imprisoned, the bed-ridden, the discouraged, the stranger, the lonely, and persons of other color, nationalities of background other than our own. A catalogue of not merely suggested but required good works under these headings is provided by Our Blessed Lord himself in his description of the Last Judgment (cf. Mt 25:34-40). This salutary word of the Lord is necessary for all the year, but should be heeded with double care during Lent.