

Fast and Abstinence

Author: Colin B. Donovan, STL; Vice President for Theology, EWTN

It is a traditional doctrine of Christian spirituality that a constituent part of repentance, of turning away from sin and back to God, includes some form of penance, without which the Christian is unlikely to remain on the narrow path and be saved. (Jer 18:11, 25:5; Ez 18:30, 33:11-15; Joel 2:12; Mt 3:2; Mt 4:17; Acts 2:38) Christ Himself said that His disciples would fast once He had departed (Lk 5:35). The general law of penance, therefore, is part of the law of God for man.

The Church for her part has specified certain forms of penance, both to ensure that the Catholic will do something, as required by divine law, while making it easy for Catholics to fulfill the obligation.

Canon 1250—All Fridays through the year and the time of Lent are penitential days and times throughout the entire Church.

Canon 1251—Abstinence from eating meat or another food according to the prescriptions of the conference of bishops is to be observed on Fridays throughout the year unless (nisi) they are solemnities; abstinence and fast are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and on the Friday of the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Canon 1252—All persons who have completed their fourteenth year are bound by the law of abstinence; all adults are bound by the law of fast up to the beginning of their sixtieth year.

Nevertheless, pastors and parents are to see to it that minors who are not bound by the law of fast and abstinence are educated in an authentic sense of penance.

Canon 1253—It is for the conference of bishops to determine more precisely the observance of fast and abstinence and to substitute in whole or in part for fast and abstinence other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety.

The Church, therefore, has two forms of official penitential practices—three if the Eucharistic fast of one hour before Communion is included.

Abstinence

The law of abstinence requires a Catholic 14 years of age until death to abstain from eating meat on Fridays in honor of the Passion of Jesus on Good Friday. Meat is considered to be the flesh and organs of mammals and fowl. Also forbidden are soups or gravies made from them. Salt and freshwater species of fish,

amphibians, reptiles and shellfish are permitted, as are animal derived products such as margarine and gelatin which do not have any meat taste.

During Lent abstinence from meat on Fridays is obligatory.



Fasting:

The law of fasting requires a Catholic from the 18th to the 59th birthday to reduce the amount of food eaten from normal. The Church defines this as one meal a day, and two smaller meals which if added together would not exceed the main meal in quantity. Such fasting is obligatory on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. The fast is broken by eating between meals and by drinks which could be considered food (milk shakes, but not milk). Alcoholic beverages do not break the fast; however, they seem to be contrary to the spirit of doing penance.

Those who are excused from fast or abstinence:

Besides those outside the age limits, those of unsound mind, the sick, the frail, pregnant or nursing women according to need for meat or nourishment, manual laborers according to need, guests at a meal who cannot excuse themselves without giving great offense or causing enmity and other situations of moral or physical impossibility to observe the penitential discipline.

Aside from these minimum penitential requirements Catholics are encouraged to impose some personal penance on themselves at other times. It could be modelled after abstinence and fasting. A person could, for example, multiply the number of days they abstain. Some people give up meat entirely. One could multiply the number of days that one fasted. The early Church had a practice of a Wednesday and Saturday fast. This fast could be the same as the Church's law (one main meal and two smaller ones) or stricter, even bread and water. Such freely chosen fasting could also consist in giving up something one enjoys—candy, soft drinks, smoking, that cocktail before supper, and so on. This is left to the individual.

One final consideration. Before all else we are obliged to perform the duties of our state in life. Any deprivation that would seriously hinder us in carrying out our work, as students, employees or parents would be contrary to the will of God.