

Fasting and Abstinence

Statement from the Bishops of England and Wales on Canons 1249-1253



1. The new code of Canon Law reminds us that all of Christ's faithful are obliged to do penance. The obligation arises in imitation of Christ himself and in response to his call. During his life on earth, not least at the beginning of his public ministry. Our Lord undertook voluntary penance. He invited his followers to do the same. The penance he invited would be a participation in his own suffering, an expression of inner conversion and a form of reparation for sin. It would be a personal sacrifice made out of love for God and our neighbour. It follows that if we are to be true, as Christians, to the spirit of Christ, we must practise some form of penance.
2. So that all may be united with Christ and with one another in a common practice of penance, the Church sets aside certain penitential days. On these days the faithful are to devote themselves in a special way to prayer, self-denial and works of charity. Such days are not designed to confine or isolate penance but to intensify it in the life of the Christian right through the year.
3. Lent is the traditional season of renewal and repentance in Christ. The New Code re-affirms this. It also prescribes that Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are to be observed as days of fast and abstinence. Fasting means that the amount of food we eat is considerably reduced. Abstinence means that we give up a particular kind of food or drink or form of amusement.

Those over eighteen are bound by the law of fasting until the beginning of their sixtieth year, while all over fourteen are bound by the law of abstinence. Priests and parents are urged to foster the spirit and practice of penance among those too young to be the subjects of either law.

4. Because each Friday recalls the crucifixion of Our Lord, it too is set aside as a special penitential day. The Church does not prescribe, however, that fish must be eaten on Fridays. It never did. Abstinence always meant the giving up of meat rather than the eating of fish as a substitute. What the Church does require, according to the new Code, is that its members abstain on Fridays from meat or some other food or that they perform some alternative work of penance laid down by the Bishops' Conference.
5. In accordance with the mind of the universal Church, the Bishops of England and Wales remind their people of the obligation of Friday penance, and instruct them that it may be fulfilled in one or more of the following ways:
 - a) by abstaining from meat or some other food;
 - b) by abstaining from alcoholic drink, smoking or some form of amusement;
 - c) by making the special effort involved in family prayer, taking part in the Mass, visiting the Blessed Sacrament or praying the Stations of the Cross;
 - d) by fasting from all food for a longer period than usual and perhaps giving what is saved in this way to the needy at home and abroad;
 - e) by making a special effort to help somebody who is poor, sick, old or lonely.
6. The form of penance we adopt each Friday is a matter of personal choice and does not have to take the same form every Friday. Failure to undertake this penance on a particular Friday would not constitute a sin. However, penance is part of the life of every Christian and the intention to do penance on Friday is of obligation. We are confident that the faithful of England and Wales will take this obligation to heart in memory of the passion and death of Our Lord.

Bishops of England and Wales
24 January 1985