

Church Documents

Fast and Abstinence

Good Friday and **Ash Wednesday** are the major days for fasting in general for those who have reached the age 18 and are not yet 60. Abstinence means no meat on those days for those who are age 14 [or over]. General canon law says that **all Fridays** are days of abstinence -- no meat -- but if you want to eat meat, you should substitute some other form of penance.

The US rules for abstinence from meat includes all Fridays during Lent; **Fast** (small meals, no snacks) + **Abstinence** (as in universal rules -- no meat) on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Since the Council, the US bishops have never specified a particular penance for the **other Fridays** of the year; but the universal law still applies -- therefore it is left to the individual to choose the form this penance takes. Since abstinence from meat is traditional (and pretty straightforward), many Catholics observe still this as their form of penance that is required of Catholics on all Fridays (Canon 1250). Many, however, entirely ignore the law of penance on Fridays.

The practice of "giving up something" for Lent is part of this same requirement in the penitential season of Lent, though what you have to give up is not specified.

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.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

1387 To prepare for worthy reception of this sacrament, the faithful should observe the fast required in their Church.²²⁰ Bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing) ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest.

1434 The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms, *fasting*, *prayer*, and *almsgiving*,³¹ which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others. Alongside the radical purification brought about by Baptism or martyrdom they cite as means of obtaining forgiveness of sins: effort at reconciliation with one's neighbor, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one's neighbor, the intercession of the saints, and the practice of charity "which covers a multitude of sins."³²

1438 *The seasons and days of penance* in the course of the liturgical year (**Lent** and each Friday in memory of the death of the Lord) are intense moments of the Church's penitential practice.³⁶ These times are particularly appropriate for spiritual exercises, penitential liturgies, pilgrimages as signs of penance, voluntary self-denial such as fasting and almsgiving, and fraternal sharing (charitable and missionary works).

1969 The New Law *practices the acts of religion*: almsgiving, prayer and fasting, directing them to the "Father who sees in secret," in contrast with the desire to "be seen by men."²⁴ Its prayer is the Our Father.²⁵

2043 The fourth precept ("You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church") ensures the times of asceticism and penance which prepare us for the liturgical feasts and help us acquire mastery over our instincts and freedom of heart.⁸⁵

The fifth precept ("You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church") means that the faithful are obliged to assist with the material needs of the Church, each according to his own ability.⁸⁶

The faithful also have the duty of providing for the material needs of the Church, each according to his own abilities.⁸⁷

USCCB "[Penitential Practices for Today's Catholics](#)" Committee on Pastoral Practices National Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 12, 2000.

History - Code of Canon Law 1917 edition

The laws regarding abstinence and fast were codified in the old (1917) Code of Canon Law, which are abrogated by the 1983 Code; however this is where one finds the PRECISE definitions of fast and abstinence that are now retained as "traditional". - hhh

Here are the relevant 1917 Canons:

Canon 1250 The law of abstinence prohibits meat and soups made of meat but not of eggs, milks, and other condiments, even if taken from animals.

1. The law of fast prescribes that there be only one meal a day; but it does not forbid that a little bit [of food] be taken in the morning and the evening, observing, nevertheless, the approved custom of places concerning the quantity and the quality of the food.
2. It is not forbidden to mix meat and fish in the same meal; or to exchange the evening meal with lunch.

Canon 1252.

1. The law of abstinence only must be observed every Friday.
2. The law of abstinence together with fast must be observed every Ash Wed, every Friday and Saturday of Lent, each of the Ember Days, and the vigils of the Pentecost, the Assumption of the God-bearer into heaven, All Saints, and the Nativity of the Lord.
3. The law of fast only is to be observed on all the other days of Lent.

4. On Sundays or feasts of precept, the law of abstinence or of abstinence and fast or a fast only ceases, except during Lent, nor is the vigil anticipated; likewise it ceases on Holy Saturday afternoon.

Canon 1254.

1. The law of abstinence binds all those who have completed seven years of age.
 2. All those are bound by the law of fast from the completion of the twenty-first year of age until the beginning of the sixtieth.
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Additional notes:

A Conference of Bishops may alter the forms of fasting and abstinence.

In 1966, following Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Constitution, *Paenitemini*, which stated that the Holy See "intends to ratify with its prescriptions other forms of penitence as well, provided that it seems opportune to Episcopal conferences to replace the observance of fast and abstinence with exercises of prayer and works of charity" (P Ch III.C) and said the Conferences of Bishops could "substitute for fast and abstinence other forms of penance, especially works of charity and devotional practices" (P , Ch III,VI.1.B) the US bishops directed that:

"Catholics in the United States are obliged to abstain from the eating of meat on Ash Wednesday and on all Fridays during the season of Lent. They are also obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and on Good Friday. Self-imposed observance of fasting on all weekdays of Lent is strongly recommended. Abstinence from flesh meat on all Fridays of the year [excluding solemnities like Christmas which may fall on Friday] is especially recommended to individuals and to the Catholic community as a whole."

The relevant Canons are 1249-1253 in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (CIC) (As on our web page.)

The "or other food" clause in CIC 1249, is effectively supplanted by CIC 1253, which says, "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". (Emphasis added.)

In 1978, Paul VI in an address on Lent said:

"What remains of the Lenten obligation of abstinence and fast? Is nothing left of that season that once was so demanding, so strict, and so...ritualized? Except for the two fast days still obligatory for those capable [Ash Wed. and Good Friday], the strict obligation of former years has been abolished by the Church in its sensitivity to changed conditions and the demands of modern life. Yet for strong and faithful spirits what does remain is all the more worthy of being kept carefully in mind. Two elements supply for the former fast: personal austerity in regard to food, amusements, and work and love of neighbor -... All of this is left, along with the obligation of abstaining from meat on Friday during Lent. ..." (DOL 461 §3876 – Feb 8, 1978,)

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