

Lenten Penitential Practices

The Law of Fast and Abstinence

According to long standing Catholic tradition, and according to the Code of Canon Law (canons 1249-1253), all Catholics are encouraged, and most are obliged to observe days and times of fast and abstinence. The law of fast binds all adult Catholics up to their sixtieth year. Traditionally, fasting means that we only take one full meal a day, and that our other two smaller meals do not together make a full meal. The law of abstinence binds all Catholics over the age of thirteen. Abstinence quite simply means that we do not eat meat.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of fast and abstinence for the Universal Church. Catholics are encouraged to fast and abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent as well. However, over and above that which we are bound to do by Canon Law, Catholics are encouraged by the Scriptures and by the living Tradition of the Church to willingly and joyfully take upon themselves the three traditional disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving throughout the Season of Lent.

Lenten Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving

It has become popular in the past number of years for Catholics to say that “we used to give something up for Lent, but now we do something instead”. While this notion is intended to be a positive look at Lent it somewhat misses the point of the Catholic Tradition. Catholics have never been an “either/or” people, but rather a community that believes in “both/and”. The Gospels encourage us to three traditional disciplines, ***prayer, fasting, and alms-giving***. We are meant to deny ourselves - ***fasting***, in order to have more time and resources to share with the poor, the children, the aged or the infirm - ***alms-giving***. All of our Lenten efforts should begin and end with ***prayer!*** As you choose how you will observe the Lenten Season please make sure that your observance includes all three of these disciplines which come to us from the Gospel of Christ.