



INFORMATION

CATHOLIC WITNESS – FRIDAY PENANCE

The Visit of Pope Benedict XVI evoked for many people the spiritual reality of life and rekindled hope and faith: hope in the goodness that is within people and in our society, and faith in God.

Even if it is not easily articulated, a spiritual yearning is to be found within most people. This yearning is found also among Catholics who have lost touch with their faith or whose faith was never deeply rooted in a personal relationship with Christ. Wishing to respond to this yearning but perhaps lacking in confidence in talking about their own spiritual life, many Catholics are asking how they can witness to their faith; what can they do to help introduce their faith in Christ to others in simple and straightforward ways?

The Bishops of England and Wales recognise that simple acts of witness, accompanied by sincere prayer, can be a powerful call to faith. Traditional Catholic devotions such as making the sign of the cross with care and reverence, praying the Angelus, saying a prayer before and after our meals, to name only a few, are straightforward actions which both dedicate certain moments in our daily lives to Almighty God and demonstrate our love and trust in His goodness and providence. If these devotions have been lost or even forgotten, particularly in our homes and schools, we have much to gain from learning and living them again.

The Bishops have looked again at the role of devotions and the practice of penance, both of which can help to weave the Catholic faith into the fabric of everyday life. Our regular worship at Holy Mass on Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection, is the most powerful outward sign and witness of our faith in Jesus Christ to our family, friends and neighbours. Sunday must always remain at the heart of our lives as Catholics.

The Bishops also wish to remind us that every Friday is set aside as a special day of penance, as it is the day of the suffering and death of the Lord. They believe it is important that all the faithful again be united in a common, identifiable act of Friday penance because they recognise that the virtue of penance is best acquired as part of a common resolve and common witness.

The law of the Church requires Catholics on Fridays to abstain from meat, or some other form of food, or to observe some other form of penance laid down by the Bishops' Conference.ⁱ The Bishops have decided to re-establish the practice that this penance should be fulfilled simply by abstaining from meat and by uniting this to prayer. Those who cannot or choose not to eat meat as part of their normal diet should abstain from some other food of which they regularly partake. This decision will come into effect from Friday 16 September 2011.

Since the Bishops of England and Wales announced this decision in May 2011, a number of questions have been asked. Among these are the following:

Q1. With all that is happening in our society and our world, are there not more important things to be concentrating on? Why have the Bishops of England and Wales re-introduced this common act of penance now?

The Bishops are of course very much aware of the great issues and challenges that we face at home and abroad. As shepherds of the Church and successors of the Apostles, in communion with the successor of Peter, they are charged by Christ to read the 'signs of the times' and re-examine in each new age how the Church needs to respond to these issues and challenges.

Re-emphasising the importance of penitence is but one of the responses the Bishops wish to make to the growing desire of people to deepen and give identity to the spiritual aspects of their lives.

Indeed, even though since 1985 it has been possible in England and Wales for the faithful to substitute another act of penance in place of abstinence from meat, many Catholics have continued to practice this ancient form of penitence.

Moreover, there are signs that in recent years, the practice of voluntary Friday abstinence has become more prevalent, especially among young Catholics who are seeking a greater sense of their Catholic identity and are looking for ways of bringing their faith into their daily lives.

It is also clear that many of us forget our obligation to do penance on a Friday. Abstaining from meatⁱⁱ is easy to remember, a simple way to give witness at work, at

school and even in the family and, although it is still an act of penitence, cannot be considered to put any real or substantial additional burden on the lives of the faithful.

Q2. What is penitence?

Penitence is the sorrow we feel, and know in justice is due, for wrongs that have been done. Penance is the expression of penitence as an act, or acts, of repentance and is part of a healing process which brings reconciliation and peace. Penance may be done for wrongs committed personally or for wrongs done by another.

Without 'penitence', acts of penance could become merely mechanical and of no spiritual benefit. The precept of penitenceⁱⁱⁱ reminds us therefore that we are in need of continuous "...conversion and renewal, a renewal which must be implemented not only interiorly and individually but also externally and socially"^{iv}.

For Catholics, the practice of penance constitutes a necessary component of Christian life.^v The Sacred Scriptures and the early Church Fathers insist above all on three forms of penance, prayer, fasting and almsgiving (or works of charity). These express respectively, conversion in relation to God, to oneself and to others.^{vi}

Expressed by acts of penance, penitence is the spiritual disposition by which every Catholic identifies with Christ in his death on the cross. In prayer, we unite the sufferings and sacrifices in our lives with those of Christ's passion.^{vii} In fasting or abstaining from some food, we die a little to self in order to be close to Christ. In almsgiving, we demonstrate our solidarity with the sufferings of Christ in those in need.^{viii} All three forms of penitence constitute a vital part of Christian living. When this is visible 'externally and socially', then it is also an important act of witness.

Q3. Why are we obliged to practice penitence on Fridays?

From the earliest centuries of the Church's history, Friday was dedicated to the memory of the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, as a day on which we should make a special effort to practice penitence. The seasons and days of penitence in the course of the Liturgical year (Lent, and each Friday) are therefore intense moments of the Church's penitential practice.^{ix}

For this reason, the *Code of Canon Law* of the Catholic Church specifies the obligations of Latin Rite^x Catholics: “All Fridays through the year and the time of Lent are penitential days and times throughout the entire Church.” (Canon 1250)

Q4. Why is abstinence from meat or any particular food a part of penitence?

Abstinence is a form of fasting. It is a way of disciplining or training the body. Few question the need to watch our intake of food when we are training to take part in a sport. Abstinence is part of our spiritual training. It reminds us that our bodies and our lives are gifts of God. Abstinence can also remind us (and each other) of the sacredness of the lives of others who lack the food we enjoy. As a public witness then, it can be a service to those whose life and human dignity are in danger from poverty, hunger and all forms of violence.

The precise reason for the traditional practice of abstaining specifically from meat^{xi} on Fridays and other penitential days is not known. What is without doubt is that it is a very ancient tradition^{xii}, common to both the Latin Rite Church and the Eastern Rite Churches.

Q5. Eating meat is not that important to me and therefore not much of a penance or sacrifice on my part. What then is the value of my abstaining from meat on a Friday?

For some people abstinence from meat will not necessarily be much of a ‘personal’ penance or sacrifice. Indeed, many people do not eat meat. Giving up going out with friends on a Friday night, for example, would be for some much more of a penance or personal sacrifice. However, to say that we do not eat meat or we dislike meat, or that we ‘prefer fish’, is to miss the point!

What the Bishops are asking us to do, first and foremost, is to make abstaining from meat a common act of penitence; a common witness and sacrifice. This act unites us and reminds us of our personal duty, each Friday, to sacrifice something which is precious to us out of love for Almighty God and out of love for others. Moreover, it is not just as an individual act of witness that we are asked to undertake Friday penance but as a weekly prophetic witness of the whole Catholic community. It witnesses that

being a Catholic requires us, as a community, through our prayer, abstaining and almsgiving/works of charity, to stand alongside those who are in need.

If abstaining from meat is not really a sacrifice for us then we should consider doing something in addition to abstaining from meat. This will keep us united in this common sign of witness and enable us to make our act of penitence a real personal sacrifice and help us to stand in solidarity with those in real need.

Q6. Does this mean that we should eat fish on Fridays?

There is no requirement for us to eat fish instead of meat on a Friday. Our act of abstinence does not mean that we have to eat another particular type of food as the regular substitute for meat on a Friday. The precise goal of penitence is not simply the avoidance of meat or its substitution with another food but relating the external and common act of penance we do to inner conversion, prayer and works of charity^{xiii}.

Q7. What should I do if I am invited out for a meal on a Friday?

If our friends and colleagues value us they will not be offended or upset if we tell them, ahead of time, that we do not eat meat on Fridays.

Our choice to observe abstaining from meat in this social setting does permit us though to witness - in an indirect way - that our Catholic faith is important, that we are not ashamed of it. It may also provide us with an opportunity, particularly if we are asked, to explain to our friends and colleagues what the significance of our faith is for us and our lives.

Q8. Why is prayer important to our Friday penance?

Next to Sunday, the Lord's Day, Friday has always been a special day in the Catholic Church for prayer. On a Sunday our prayer is in thanksgiving to God for the new and eternal life brought to us by Christ's resurrection from the dead. On a Friday our prayer is in thanksgiving for the gift of the mortal life that we have been given; a life which Christ willingly sacrificed on the cross for our sake. A fitting prayer then, as part of our Friday penance, would be to ask Almighty God to turn away all threats to mortal life.

The act of abstinence itself can be offered consciously as a prayer for life and in reparation for sins against life.

Q9. What has almsgiving or works of charity to do with abstaining from meat on a Friday?

Abstaining from meat on a Friday is not meant to be an end in itself. We engage in this common act of penitence to encourage each other and to unite all our personal sacrifices, whatever they may be for us as individuals, with the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross for the good of all. Abstinence from meat (or some other food if meat is not part of our regular diet) can also be put at the service of others if we make a sacrifice and give the financial savings made from our abstention (or fasting) to charities which assist those who are poor or suffering. If we are unable to make that financial sacrifice, we can still perform a 'work of charity', an act of kindness and love to another person who is in need or suffering in some way.

Q10. Are all Catholics obliged to do penance by abstaining from meat on Fridays?

Canon 1251 of the *Code of Canon Law* states: "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 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 states that: "The law of abstinence binds those who have completed their fourteenth year. The law of fasting binds those who have attained their majority, until the beginning of their sixtieth year. Pastors of souls and parents are to ensure that even those who by reason of their age are not bound by the law of fasting and abstinence, are taught the true meaning of penance."

Those under fourteen years of age, the sick, the elderly and frail, pregnant women, seafarers, manual workers according to need, guests at a meal who cannot excuse themselves without giving great offense to their hosts or causing friction, and those in other situations of moral or physical impossibility are not required to observe abstention from meat; in other words, we should act prudently.

Q11. Are the Bishops placing a greater obligation on Catholics in England and Wales? Apart from the exceptions above, will it be a 'sin' to eat meat on a Friday after the Bishops' decision takes effect in September?

The obligation on Catholics in England and Wales to do penance on a Friday will be the same after Friday 16 September 2011 as it was before that date. The only change is that the Bishops have determined that the requirement by all the faithful to do penance on a Friday will be fulfilled by abstaining from meat.

When asked a similar question to this, the Holy See replied that the 'gravity' of the obligation applies to our intention to observe penance as a regular and necessary part of our spiritual lives as a whole^{xiv}.

Therefore, the 'gravity' of the obligation does not relate to observing the specific act of penance (abstaining from meat) prescribed by the Conference of Bishops. The 'gravity' of the obligation applies to the intention to do penance during the prescribed penitential days and seasons of the Church's year^{xv}. Failure to abstain from meat on a particular Friday then would not constitute a sin.

Fr Marcus Stock
General Secretary
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

ⁱ Code of Canon Law, Canon 1251

ⁱⁱ The Bishops have also stated that those who cannot or choose not to eat meat as part of their normal diet should abstain from some other food of which they regularly partake.

ⁱⁱⁱ Apostolic Constitution, *Paenitemini*, Pope Paul VI, 1966

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Code of Canon Law, Canon 1249

^{vi} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1434

^{vii} Galatians 2:20

^{viii} Matthew 25:40

^{ix} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1438

^x Eastern Rite Catholics have their own penitential practices as specified by the *Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches*

^{xi} The practice of abstaining from what belongs to meat (Latin: 'carnis') in the Latin Rite Church used to include not only the flesh, offal and blood of warm-blooded animals (this is generally what 'carnis' refers to), but also things that 'came from flesh'. This included eggs, milk and any other dairy products. Most of the Eastern Rite Churches still preserve abstinence from other foods, including oil and wine, in addition to the meat of animals. However, the Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini* of Pope Paul VI states that the "the law of abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, the products of milk or condiments made of animal fat" and Canon 1251 of the Code of Canon Law requires only abstinence from meat.

-
- ^{xii} Explicit mention is made of the practice of abstinence on Fridays from the end of the first century A.D., the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, as well as by St Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian in the third century. St Gregory the Great, writing to St Augustine of Canterbury, spoke of the practice regarding abstinence "We abstain from flesh meat, and from all things that come from flesh, as milk, cheese, and eggs."
- ^{xiii} Apostolic Constitution, *Paenitemini*, Pope Paul VI, 1966
- ^{xiv} The "substantial observance" of the penitential discipline of Fridays and Ash Wednesday, Pope Paul VI wrote, "binds gravely." Interpreting this statement authoritatively, the Sacred Congregation of the Council (now the Congregation for the Clergy) decreed that this grave obligation does not refer to the individual days of penance, but to "the whole complexus of penitential days to be observed . . . that is, one sins gravely against the law, who, without an excusable cause, omits a notable part, quantitative or qualitative, of the penitential observance which is prescribed as a whole (February 24, 1967; reprinted in *Canon Law Digest*, vol. 6, pp. 684-85).
- ^{xv} Apostolic Constitution, *Paenitemini*, Pope Paul VI, 1966