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Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence

*A Statement Issued by the National Conference
of Catholic Bishops*

November 18, 1966

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.... If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and His word is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8-10).

1. Thus Sacred Scriptures declare our guilt to be universal; hence the universal obligation to that repentance which Peter, in his sermon on Pentecost, declared necessary for the forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38). Hence, too, the Church's constant recognition that all the faithful are required by divine law to do penance. As from the fact of sin we Christians can claim no exception, so from the obligation to penance we can seek no exemption.

2. Forms and seasons of penance vary from time to time and from people to people. But the need for conversion and salvation is unchanging, as is the necessity that, confessing our sinfulness, we perform, personally and in community, acts of penance in pledge of our inward penitence and conversion.

3. For these reasons, Christian peoples, members of a Church that is at once holy, penitent, and always in process of renewal, have from the beginning observed seasons and days of penance. They have done so by community penitential observances as well as by personal acts of self-denial; they have imitated the example of the spotless Son of God Himself, concerning Whom the Sacred Scriptures tell us that He went into the desert to fast and to pray for forty days (Mk 1:13). Thus Christ gave the example to which Paul appealed in teaching us how we, too, must come to the mature measures of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13).

4. Of the many penitential seasons which at one time or another have entered the liturgical calendar of Christians (who on this point have preserved the holy tradition of their Hebrew spiritual ancestors), three have particularly survived to our times: Advent, Lent, and the vigils of certain feasts.

Advent

5. Changing customs, especially in connection with preparation for Christmas, have diminished popular appreciation of the Advent season.

Something of a holiday mood of Christmas appears now to be anticipated in the days of the Advent season. As a result, this season has unfortunately lost in great measure the role of penitential preparation for Christmas that it once had.

6. Zealous Christians have striven to keep alive or to restore the spirit of Advent by resisting the trend away from the disciplines and austerities that once characterized the season among us. Perhaps their devout purpose will be better accomplished, and the point of Advent will be better fostered if we rely on the liturgical renewal and the new emphasis on the liturgy to restore its deeper understanding as a season of effective preparation for the mystery of the Nativity.

7. For these reasons, we, the shepherds of souls of this conference, call upon Catholics to make the Advent season, beginning with 1966, a time of meditation on the lessons taught by the liturgy and of increased participation in the liturgical rites by which the Advent mysteries are exemplified and their sanctifying effect is accomplished.

8. If in all Christian homes, churches, schools, retreats and other religious houses, liturgical observances are practiced with fresh fervor and fidelity to the penitential spirit of the liturgy, then Advent will again come into its own. Its spiritual purpose will again be clearly perceived.

9. A rich literature concerning family and community liturgical observances appropriate to Advent has fortunately developed in recent years. We urge instruction based upon it, counting on the liturgical renewal of ourselves and our people to provide for our spiritual obligations with respect to this season.

Lent

10. Lent has had a different history than Advent among us. Beginning with the powerful lesson of Ash Wednesday, it has retained its ancient appeal to the penitential spirit of our people. It has also acquired elements of popular piety which we bishops would wish to encourage.

11. Accordingly, while appealing for greater development of the understanding of the Lenten liturgy, as that of Advent, we hope that the observance of Lent as the principal season of penance in the Christian year will be intensified. This is the more desirable because of new insights into the central place in Christian faith of those Easter mysteries for the understanding and enjoyment of which Lent is the ancient penitential preparation.

12. Wherefore, we ask, urgently and prayerfully, that we, as people of God, make of the entire Lenten Season a period of special penitential observance. Following the instructions of the Holy See, we declare that the obligation both to fast and to abstain from meat, an

obligation observed under a more strict formality by our fathers in the faith, still binds on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. No Catholic Christian will lightly excuse himself from so hallowed an obligation on the Wednesday which solemnly opens the Lenten season and on that Friday called "Good" because on that day Christ suffered in the flesh and died for our sins.

13. In keeping with the letter and spirit of Pope Paul's Constitution *Poenitemini*, we preserved for our dioceses the tradition of abstinence from meat on each of the Fridays of Lent, confident that no Catholic Christian will lightly hold himself excused from this penitential practice.

14. For all other weekdays of Lent, we strongly recommend participation in daily Mass and a self-imposed observance of fasting. In the light of grave human needs which weigh on the Christian conscience in all seasons, we urge, particularly during Lent, generosity to local, national, and world programs of sharing of all things needed to translate our duty to penance into a means of implementing the right of the poor to their part in our abundance. We also recommend spiritual studies, beginning with the Scriptures as well as the traditional Lenten Devotions (sermons, Stations of the Cross, and the rosary), and all the self-denial summed up in the Christian concept of "mortification."

15. Let us witness to our love and imitation of Christ, by special solicitude for the sick, the poor, the underprivileged, the imprisoned, the bedridden, the discouraged, the stranger, the lonely, and persons of other color, nationalities, or backgrounds than our own. A catalogue of not merely suggested but required good works under these headings is provided by Our Blessed Lord Himself in His description of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:34-40). This salutary word of the Lord is necessary for all the year, but should be heeded with double care during Lent.

16. During the Lenten season, certain feasts occur which the liturgy or local custom traditionally exempts from the Lenten spirit of penance. The observance of these will continue to be set by local diocesan regulations; in these and like canonical questions which may arise in connection with these pastoral

instructions, reference should be made to article VII of *Poenitemini* and the usual norms.

Vigils and Ember Days

17. Vigils and Ember Days, as most now know, no longer oblige to fast and abstinence. However, the liturgical renewal and the deeper appreciation of the joy of the holy days of the Christian year will, we hope, result in a renewed appreciation as to why our forefathers spoke of "a fast before a feast." We impose no fast before any feast-day, but we suggest that the devout will find greater Christian joy in the feasts of the liturgical calendar if they freely bind themselves, for their own motives and in their own spirit of piety, to prepare for each Church festival by a day of particular self-denial, penitential prayer and fasting.

Christ Died for Our Salvation on Friday

18. Gratefully remembering this, Catholic peoples from time immemorial have set apart Friday for special penitential observance by which they gladly suffer with Christ that they may one day be glorified with Him. This is the heart of the tradition of abstinence from meat on Friday where that tradition has been observed in the holy Catholic Church.

19. Changing circumstances, including economic, dietary, and social elements, have made some of our people feel that the renunciation of the eating of meat is not always and for everyone the most effective means of practicing penance. Meat was once an exceptional form of food; now it is commonplace.

20. Accordingly, since the spirit of penance primarily suggests that we discipline ourselves in that which we enjoy most, to many in our day abstinence from meat no longer implies penance, while renunciation of other things would be more penitential.

21. For these and related reasons, the Catholic bishops of the United States, far from downgrading the traditional penitential observance of Friday, and motivated precisely by the desire to give the spirit of penance greater vitality, especially on Fridays, the day that Jesus died, urge our Catholic people henceforth to be guided by the following norms.

22. Friday itself remains a special day of penitential observance throughout the year, a time when those who seek perfection will be mindful of their personal sins and the sins of mankind which they are called upon to help expiate in union with Christ Crucified.

23. Friday should be in each week something of what Lent is in the entire year. For this reason we urge all to prepare for that weekly Easter that comes with each Sunday by freely making of every Friday a day of self-denial and mortification in prayerful remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ.

24. Among the works of voluntary self-denial and personal penance which we especially commend to our people for the future observance of Friday, even though we hereby terminate the traditional law of abstinence binding under pain of sin, as the sole prescribed means of observing Friday, we give first place to abstinence from flesh meat.

We do so in the hope that the Catholic community will ordinarily continue to abstain from meat by free choice as formerly we did in obedience to Church law. Our expectation is based on the following considerations:

a. We shall thus freely and out of love for Christ Crucified show our solidarity with the generations of believers to whom this practice frequently became, especially in times of persecution and of great poverty, no mean evidence of fidelity to Christ and His Church.

b. We shall thus also remind ourselves that as Christians, although immersed in the world and sharing its life, we must preserve a saving and necessary difference from the spirit of the world. Our deliberate, personal abstinence from meat, more especially because no longer required by law, will be an outward sign of inward spiritual values that we cherish.

25. Every Catholic Christian understands that the fast and abstinence regulations admit of change, unlike the commandments and precepts of that unchanging divine moral law which the Church must today and always defend as immutable. This said, we emphasize that our people are henceforth free from the obligation traditionally binding under pain of sin in what pertains to Friday abstinence, except as noted above for Lent. We stress this so that "no" scrupulosity will enter into examinations of conscience, confessions, or personal decisions on this point.

26. Perhaps we should warn those who decide to keep the Friday abstinence for reasons of personal piety and special love that they must not pass judgment on those who elect to substitute other penitential observances. Friday, please God,

will acquire among us other forms of penitential witness which may become as much a part of the devout way of life in the future as Friday abstinence from meat. In this connection we have foremost in mind the modern need for self-discipline in the use of stimulants and for a renewed emphasis on the virtue of temperance, especially in the use of alcoholic beverages.

27. It would bring great glory to God and good to souls if Fridays found our people doing volunteer work in hospitals, visiting the sick, serving the needs of the aged and the lonely, instructing the young in the Faith, participating as Christians in community affairs, and meeting our obligations to our families, our friends, our neighbors, and our community, including our parishes, with a special zeal born of the desire to add the merit of penance to the other virtues exercised in good works born of living faith.

28. In summary, let it not be said that by this action, implementing the spirit of renewal coming out of the Council, we have abolished Friday, repudiated the holy traditions of our fathers, or diminished the insistence of the Church on the fact of sin and the need for penance. Rather, let it be proved by the spirit in which we enter upon prayer and penance, not excluding fast and abstinence freely chosen, that these present decisions and recommendations of this conference of bishops will herald a new birth of loving faith and more profound penitential conversion, by both of which we become one with Christ, mature sons of God, and servants of God's people.

N.B. The effective date of these regulations is the first Sunday of Advent, November 27, 1966.

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