

Questions and Answers about Lent and Lenten Practices

Q. What are the responsibilities for Catholics with regard to fasting and abstinence?

The responsibilities of Catholics for fasting and abstinence are as follows: Fasting is to be observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday by all Catholics who are 18 years of age but not yet 59. Those who are bound to fast may take only one full meal. Two smaller meals are permitted if necessary to maintain strength according to each one's needs, but eating solid foods between meals is not permitted. Abstinence from meat is to be observed by all Catholics 14 years or older on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and on all Fridays of Lent. The determination of certain days as obligatory days of penance should not be understood as limiting the occasions for Christian penance.

Q. Why do we say that there are forty days of Lent? When you count all the days from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday, there are 46.

A. It might be more accurate to say that there is the "forty day fast within Lent." Historically, Lent has varied from a week to three weeks to the present configuration of 46 days. The forty day fast, however, has been more stable. The Sundays of Lent are certainly part of the Time of Lent, but they are not prescribed days of fast and abstinence.

Q. So does that mean that when we give something up for Lent, like candy, we can have it on Sundays?

A. Apart from the prescribed days of fast and abstinence on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and the days of abstinence every Friday of Lent, Catholics have traditionally chosen additional penitential practices for the whole Time of Lent. These practices are disciplinary in nature and often more effective if they are continuous, *i.e.*, kept on Sundays as well. That being said, such practices are not regulated by the Church, but by individual conscience.

Q. I understand that Catholics ages 18 to 59 must fast on Ash Wednesday and on Good Friday, but what exactly are the rules for these fasts?

A. Fasting on these days means we can have only one full, meatless meal. Some food can be taken at the other regular meal times if necessary, *but combined they should be less than a full meal.* Liquids are allowed at any time, but no solid food is to be consumed between meals.

Q. Are there exemptions other than for age from the requirement to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday?

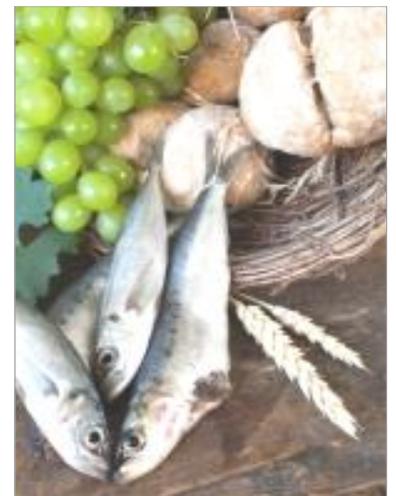
A. Those who are excused from fast and abstinence outside the age limits include the physically or mentally ill, including individuals suffering from chronic illnesses such as diabetes. Also excluded are pregnant or nursing women. In all cases, common sense should prevail, and ill persons should not further jeopardize their health by fasting.

Q. I understand that all the Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence from meat, but I'm not sure what is classified as meat. Does meat include chicken and dairy products?

A. Abstinence laws consider that meat comes only from animals such as chickens, cows, sheep or pigs — all of which live on land. Birds are considered meat. Abstinence does not include meat juices and liquid foods made from meat. Thus, such foods as chicken broth, consommé soups cooked or flavored with meat, meat gravies or sauces, as well as seasonings or condiments made from animal fat are technically not forbidden. However, moral theologians have traditionally taught that we should abstain from all animal-derived products (except foods such as gelatin, butter, cheese, and eggs, which do not have any meat taste). Fish are a different category of animal. Salt and freshwater species of fish, amphibians, reptiles (including alligator), and shellfish are permitted.

Q. I've noticed that restaurants and grocery stores advertise specials on expensive types of fish and seafood on Fridays during Lent. I know many Catholics take advantage of these deals, but I don't feel right treating myself to the lobster special on Fridays during Lent.

A. While fish, lobster and other shellfish aren't considered meat and can be consumed on days of abstinence, indulging in a lavish buffet at your favorite seafood place misses the point! Abstaining from meat and other indulgences during Lent is a penitential practice. On the Fridays of Lent, we remember Christ's sacrifice on Good Friday and unite ourselves with that sacrifice through abstinence and prayer.



from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

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