



A message to the faithful of the archdiocese from Archbishop Michael Jackels

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Understanding church laws for Lent

In last week's issue of *The Witness* there was a reminder concerning the Church laws about abstaining from meat on Fridays of Lent and fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Before I go any further, let me say that penance, like abstinence and fasting, is good and needed:

- To express our sorrow for sins we committed and our purpose of amendment;
- To satisfy justice, repairing the harm caused to the order of creation caused by the selfishness of our sins, and hopefully reducing the likelihood of future sin;
- And as an act of redistributive suffering, depriving oneself of some comforts in order to be able to bring comfort to others.

Because penance can be spiritually beneficial, there are laws requiring that at least some minimal amount of it be part of the lives of Christians.

But as with any Church law, we have to be careful that they don't stunt our spiritual growth by inspiring legalistic thinking: what is the least I must do to satisfy the requirement, or how much can I get away with before finding myself on the wrong side of the law? This attitude distracts us from the good thing that the law enshrines, for example, penance.

Obedying laws for their own sake can be used like a shield to keep God at bay (kind of like obeying speeding laws to stay under the radar). A focus on law can also make us self-satisfied, thinking that we've given God his due and that's enough.

But God wants more. God wants a relationship with us, ever closer and deeper. And God wants us to want a relationship, expressed for example in the daily familiar conversation of prayer. God also wants us to have a relationship with others. In this regard, we can't hope to be a friend of God while ignoring our neighbor, even if we keep Church laws.

So, during the holy season of Lent, we should by all means observe Church laws, such as Friday abstinence, fasting, making a good Confession, receiving Holy Communion worthily, worshipping at Holy Mass on Sundays and other Holy Days, and supporting the mission of the Church, especially our outreach to the poor.

But I hope Lent is also for us a time of responding to God's invitation to come close, to go deeper in our relationship with Jesus, knowing who he is, what he taught, what he did, and what he asks of his followers. Over the course of these 40 days, why not read one of the gospels, a little bit each day. Maybe too make the corporal and spiritual works of mercy an intentional daily practice, such

that by the end of Lent mercy has become a personal habit for us, something we do spontaneously, easily, and happily.

As a result, maybe at the end of Lent we won't need a law about doing penance, but will do it independent of Church law, seeing it as part of an ever closer, deeper relationship with God. May it please God.

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